In The Stars

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In The Stars

by love_chair_emotion

Summary

As a teenager, up-and-coming actor Ben Pincus starred in the popular tv show Camp Cretaceous. Unknown to most, he and co-star Kenji Kon were *more* than just friends.

And then one day, they weren't even friends anymore.

Now, Ben is offered the lead role of a lifetime! The catch? **It's a gay romance with Kenji opposite him.** Navigating life as an actor is already tough, but having to work intimately with an ex? At least his friends are also along for the ride.

or

Exes To Lovers/Actors AU

My Own Soul's Warning

Chapter Summary

Ben is offered a new role.

Chapter Notes

Hello! This is the start of my new AU! Hope you enjoy!

Ben POV

2025 EDIT: reflected Ben's height and Brooklynn's missing limb in CT. Same for the rest of the chapters. Otherwise, story is the same!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ben wonders if there's such a thing as smart-curtains; ones that open or close with an app. If not, he should invest in a startup willing to make one for him. That, or, blow up the sun- whichever is more feasible.

The morning light shines brightly through his open blinds, falling squarely on him. He's at least face down on his bed and blocking it out, but the heat is becoming intolerable even on this autumn morning. The faint, familiar scent of coffee wafts in the air- further wakening him from his not-so-deep slumber. His lack of sleep is to be expected; he only got in from New York a couple of hours ago. The film festival he attended was fun, but flying back to Los Angeles immediately after was basically him begging to be jetlagged.

But then again, as an actor, it's nothing he's not used to.

The promise of a fresh pot of coffee is more than enough to tempt him to get out of bed, but that would be admitting defeat. He *wants* to sleep in on his day off- rare as it is. And why shouldn't he? Despite

only being twenty-two years old, Ben Pincus is an industry veteran, having acted for both film and television since he could talk. He'd dare say he's a solid B-Lister. Of course, his job often requires long and tiring days- so, he feels he should enjoy any comforts he's afforded, and sleeping in on an unbusy day is one of them.

Except today *isn't* an 'unbusy day.'

Ben groans into his pillow, remembering the phone call he had with his agent while he was waiting for his flight last night.

'Remember, the meeting is at nine! I know you're still in the middle of filming for 'Survival' but I really think you're going to want to hear what they have to say.'

'Not that I don't appreciate all you do for me Mae, but you realize I'll get in at three in the morning, right? If we count the drive from LAX, I won't get home until 5.'

'You can sleep on the plane!'

'...'

'Ben.'

'...Right.'

‘Perfect! Don’t be late!’

If you were wondering, he couldn’t sleep a wink on the plane.

He finally finds it in him to flip over, freeing himself from the face-down position he sleeps in. Like this, the sun is bright in his eyes and the smell of coffee grows even stronger. Of course, the fact that coffee is being brewed *at all* means the house-keeper is already here, which in turn means it’s already seven in the morning.

'Remember, the meeting is at nine!'

Ugh…

Ben lies there in silence for all of five seconds before he gets up, throws on his bathrobe, and heads to the kitchen.

Mae Turner is not someone to be trifled with- a fact he's learned the hard way.

She only manages two other people, but she somehow gives them all one-hundred-ten percent. Ben is always going to auditions, landing roles, and attending events thanks to her. Heck, without her, he wouldn’t have even been able to attend that film festival he’s still so tired from. She works him hard, but she has never steered him wrong. In all the years Mae has been his agent, her opinions and stubbornness- something one *needs* in this industry- have been pillars he’s relied on. Without her, who knows what kind of career he’d have. That’s not to say she’s pulling all the strings or anything; She listens to what he wants but knows what’s best, and often enough, the two intersect.

So, whatever it is he's going to be offered at the meeting, the fact that Mae seems so gungho about it means it's at least worth the trip.

The smell of coffee is suddenly overwhelmed by the smell of bacon and toast, and Ben can't get to the kitchen fast enough.

He glides down his long hallway, passing poster after poster hanging on either side. They're all of movies or series he's been a part of, and the further down one goes from the bedroom, the older the role. He pointedly ignores the poster that hangs right next to the door to the kitchen as he heads in.

"Oh, Ben! You're up early." His housekeeper, Firecracker, greets cheerily. She stands in front of his gas-range, pans covering it. 'Firecracker' is a nickname he came up with, since her initials are FC, and her actual name is kind of long. She was very enthusiastic about it, saying her friends in school called her something similar. Though, many times, he finds himself simply calling her 'FC.'

"Got a meeting in a couple of hours. Besides, I could smell the tasty things being whipped up in here." He teases, wringing his hands hungrily.

"Oh, you flatter me." She giggles. "Nothing is ready just yet. If you wait in the living room, I'll bring you a plate when it's done."

"Sounds great. The coffee is ready, though?"

"Already got a cup for you on the counter."

“You know me so well, FC.” He sings playfully, already reaching for the mug. He smiles to himself as he takes a sip, hearing his young housekeeper giggle at his words.

He heads out of the kitchen, once again ignoring that poster next to the door.

To Ben’s grateful surprise, the living room is already warmed up, the blinds are open and the TV is tuned in to the celebrity news channel. FC has been his housekeeper for less than a year and she’s already his favorite yet. Though to be honest, the bar is pretty low. Last year, he had one who turned out to be a stalker that hadn’t been properly vetted. One day, he came home early from a shoot and found the guy rifling through his hamper, doing God knows with his laundry. Ben shudders at the memory.

“-and from what his agency has told us, he’s accepted the role of a leading man in an upcoming romcom! Let me tell you, since ‘Love, Simon’ I’ve been dying to see Zach Mitchell in another romance movie.”

Ben relaxes into his recliner, takes another sip of his coffee, and turns the volume up.

“Now, let’s move on to the rumor mill.”

Ah. Here we go.

Ben wouldn't admit it, but he's a bit of a gossip- always interested in what he and his fellow actors are supposedly up to, with healthy dose of skepticism of course. Some of the things they report on are downright lies, and in some extreme cases, have damaged someone's reputation beyond repair. Though, when one is a public figure, one

learns to take everything with a grain of salt. In Ben's case, he's learned to ignore headlines like, ‘Ben Pincus and Maisie Lockwood rumored to be dating’.

Yeah, there are a few things wrong with that.

One: she’s too young. A four year age gap is nothing really, at least by Hollywood standards, but she's a literal 18 year old. Nothing against being that young- that's how old FC is, actually- but she's here as an employee, and the idea of dating someone that age is... Yikes.

Two: they’ve interacted once. Ever. Twice, maybe. They both voiced characters in the same animated movie, but they never recorded anything together. Ben doesn’t do pressers very often, and the few he did were by himself. They literally met during the movie’s red carpet premiere. He guesses the only other time they could have met was if they were at the same party- a rare but not unheard of thing for him. Maybe some paparazzo saw them near each other, or something mundane like that, and drew his own conclusions.

And, most importantly, three: Ben is **gay.** That isn't public knowledge or anything, but still.

So yeah, don’t believe everything you hear.

“And, no surprises here, but there is talk that Darius Bowman has another new movie role lined up. No word on how big his involvement is yet. It’s all very hush-hush, but a little birdie told me that a famous screenwriter has been linked to the project as well.”

Ben smiles at that report, hoping that ‘rumor’ is true.

He and Darius were co-stars on *Camp Cretaceous,* a mildly popular show about teens at a dinosaur-themed summer camp. Ben played Sean, the wimpy kid who grows bolder each season, and Darius played Paul, the de facto leader of their ragtag group of misfits. The show itself ended years ago, but they've kept in regular contact since. In fact, Ben keeps in touch with most of his former CC co-stars to varying degrees, the most being the other campers.

With one glaring exception.

In the hallway hangs the only memorabilia Ben has displayed in his home of his time on Camp Cretaceous- the show's season five poster. The only reason he even *has* it is because his mom gave it to him as a birthday present. She visits him a few times a year, so he can't exactly *not* have it up.

Ben ignores it every time he passes it because of… *him.*

Kenji.

His hands instinctively itch, and he almost reaches for hand sanitizer he no longer carries around. He chastises himself for relapsing for a second. *Remember what Doctor Harding told you- calm down and focus on other things.* Ben takes a massive swig of coffee and groans from the slight sting of it, hoping it proves enough of a distraction as he wills himself not to think of that guy again.

"Need a refill, Ben?" Firecracker asks, the housekeeper appearing behind him. She has a plate of bacon, eggs, and toast in one hand and the coffee pot in the other.

"Huh? Oh. Yes, please." She tops him off and hands him the plate, then scuttles back to the kitchen. He'd offer her to sit with him out

here and eat, but his mood is slightly soured since he thought of you-know-who.

It's been a while since he's seen *him* in person. This is by design, of course. He checks in advance if the guy is attending any event or premiere he's invited to, and if he is already confirmed to be going, Ben will cancel his own appearance. Its certainly caused some less than ideal situations, but Ben would rather deal with that than him. There are of course times when it's unavoidable, and the pair inevitably are at the same place at the same time. When that happens, they are, shall we say, less than cordial with each other. The interactions don't last long, since Ben can't stand being around Kenji for more than a minute, but through fake smiles for the cameras, the two can be quite passive-aggressive.

Yeah, it's mutual. Kenji seems to have the same aversion to him, though probably without the psychological tics.

Besides those rare moments, they don't see a whole lot of each other. Ben doesn't go to reunions the Camp Fam invites him to, and his guilty pleasure of celeb gossip is limited to television, where he can quickly turn it off if a certain someone appears. However, there *are* times, like now, that he just happens to think of the other. He takes a moment to collect himself. Just sitting there, his food growing cold. The sounds from the TV are just white-noise now.

"...freak." he whispers involuntarily, flinching as the word leaves his mouth. It's been a while since he's done *that.*

Two minor relapses aren't all that concerning, but it irritates him nonetheless. Apparently, semi-scalding his mouth and a brief conversation with his housekeeper wasn't enough of a distraction.

The sooner you leave, the sooner you can focus on work- or whatever it is

Mae has lined up for you.

Ben scarfs down the delicious breakfast, unable to hold back a groan of satisfaction, followed by a short coughing fit from eating too quickly. He takes the plate to the kitchen and goes to change. Minutes later, Ben emerges in his ‘schmoozing outfit’, or so Mae calls it. It's literally just a blue dress shirt and some khakis- formal but comfortable.

Before he can head out, he hears the TV still on in the living room. He must have forgotten to turn it off after eating. Sighing, he heads back in.

Just as he’s about hit the power button on the remote, the ‘rumor mill’ changes topics, and the image plastered on his screen stops him- A familiar face with the perfect coiffure. Standing next to him, another familiar face, framed in bright pink hair.

Then the headline, in all bold letters, steals his attention.

＜KenLynn: Marriage On The Horizon?＞

“We saved the juiciest for last, folks!” The excited host announces. “There is speculation that Kenji Kon and Brooklynn may be tying the knot in the near future. We have confirmed with sources who live in the same building that movers were taking an abnormal amount of boxes out of the luxury apartment. Maybe they're looking for a larger home now that they're engaged? The most solid evidence we have is that Brooklynn has been seen wearing a new ring lately, and we can't help but wonder about the timing of all this.”

Ben slinks down into the chair, absorbing every word being said.

“Ben? I thought you-” FC's voice cuts in. Ben immediately shushes her, not wanting to miss anything. He hears her utter a soft ‘oops, sorry’ before shuffling on to do whatever it is she does when he's not home.

“The couple have always seemed happy together, but is there reason to think they'll finally take the next step in their relationship?”

Ben said it himself earlier: *take everything you hear with a grain of salt.* This is all just entertainment for the masses and shouldn’t be treated as gospel.

But for some reason, one he doesn't want to analyze at the moment, he can’t tear himself away from the television.

“I’m sure everyone remembers how their characters Ryan and Jenna on ‘Camp Cretaceous’ got together in season four, as did the actors who played them. They were just teenagers at the time, but they've remained together ever since. Kenji was by her side after her accident that left Brooklynn with only one arm, and it seemed nothing could stop the two. If the rumors are true, one of the sweetest couples in Hollywood are writing a new chapter in their storybook romance.”

Ben has enough wits about him to scoff at that.

He still doesn’t turn the TV off, though. Which is a mistake.

The image next to the host switches to a group shot of all six of the main cast on the set of Camp Cretaceous and Ben feels like he’s been sucker punched. It’s a candid shot, probably taken by one of the staff. Sammy and Yaz are sharing an orange from crafty, Brooklynn is sleeping on Darius’ shoulder as he talks to an AD, and Ben and Kenji

are laughing about something.

The sight of him and Kenji, as they were back then, makes Ben's stomach churn.

"-and that's not all! Another rumor has it that Kenji is in talks for a new role along side-"

Ben finally shuts off the TV.

Once again, he has the urge to reach for sanitizer- to which, he ignores. He doesn't get up for another few minutes, just sitting in his cooling living room, in silence.

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Despite his minor Kenji-induced setback, Ben still manages to leave early. A good thing too, because of course, there's traffic. By the time he makes it to Masrani Studios, it's already 8:56.

He walks briskly past the busy people working, running into some writers and other staff he recognizes, only offering a polite smile as he makes his way through the offices. He knows he has the right conference room when he finds Mae outside, furiously scribbling away on her tablet. The woman looks up and smiles at him.

"You wore the schmoozing outfit. Good."

"Hey, I didn't think I'd see you here." He tells her, only mildly out of

breath.

“I could say the same to you, Sean.” She teases, making an exaggerated display of checking her watch.

Ben smirks at the nickname. Mae has been working with him since his time on Camp Cretaceous, and back then she developed a habit of calling him by that character’s name. Others called him that too, notably someone he'd rather not bring up. Despite his complicated feelings about his time on the show, he still finds the nickname endearing.

“Traffic. Barely slept, too.” He tells her, emphasizing the 'barely' part, reminding her of their conversation the previous night.

“Well, look alive, yeah? This meeting could be career changing.”

“No pressure, huh?”

“Oh, don't worry. It’ll be fine.”

“What even is this meeting *about?* It’s not an audition, otherwise you wouldn’t have me go in with such little sleep. It’s not about an award or charity, otherwise you’d have just told me over the phone." His eyes shift, looking at her scrutinizingly. "If I’m guessing, it’s something that’s already been decided and I’m simply being informed.” Ben deduces, not entirely liking his conclusion.

“More like consulted with, rather than informed.” Mae corrects. “If you say no to what they’re offering, that’s that. But I want you to keep an open mind and wait until the end of the meeting to decide.”

“That totally wasn't cryptic or anything.”

“Trust me. No matter what happens in there, know that I truly think it’s a good move. Of course, you have the final say.”

“Of course.” He hesitantly agrees. *Why is she speaking in riddles? Is… Is this not going to be a pleasant experience? She seems insistent that he stays and listen, despite him not knowing whatever this thing even is about.*

Mae’s smartwatch buzzes.

“Ah, they’re ready for you. Go in, I’ll join you after I make a call.”

Before Ben can even say anything, she’s already on her phone. From what he hears, she's arranging a meeting for one of her other talents, so he doesn't bother interrupting. With a deep breath, Ben enters the conference room.

The long table with chairs lining it on either side is empty, but for three people. At the end of the table sits an middle-aged gentleman Ben vaguely recognizes. A red-haired woman sits to his left, and a face he saw just that morning on the TV sits to the man’s right.

“Darius?”

“Ben!”

Ben excitedly half-jogs to Darius, who gets up and meets him halfway. They hug, both groaning in happiness at this unexpected reunion. The last time they met in person was a year ago, and entirely by chance. They both happened to be filming different things in Vancouver and ran into each other on the street. They ended up having lunch and spent the afternoon catching up.

“It’s so great to see you, man!” Darius beams. "Did you get taller again?"

“I guess?" Ben shrugs sheepishly. "It’s been too long, man.”

“We don’t live that far from each other. We really should meet up more often.”

“Oh for sure. Syncing our schedules is gonna be tough, though.” Ben laments.

“Don’t I know it. Oh! Where are my manners? Ben, I’d like you to meet some people.” Darius guides Ben to where the other two people in the room are sitting, both politely smiling at him. “Ben, this is Simon Masrani. He, well, owns the studio.”

“A pleasure. I don’t normally meet the talents of the films I produce, but I had to make an exception today.” The man tells him warmly, shaking his hand with vigor.

“And this is Claire Deering. She’s the writer for the film.”

“I’m also a producer, but that’s not nearly as exciting.” The woman jokes as she takes his hand.

Ah, so the rumor mill was right about this. Ben wonders if anything else *they talked about is true...*

"So… it's a *film* we're working on…?" Ben asks hesitantly, picking up on how Darius introduced the other two. They all smile at him like he said something hilarious. When he doesn't join them, Darius' brows shoot up.

"Wait… don't tell me Mae didn't tell you?"

"She's been very vague. All I know is that she's adamant I listen to what you guys are going to say."

"Ah…" Masrani muses. "Well, in that case, I shall let Miss Deering fill you in. I'm needed elsewhere anyway." The man stands and offers one final handshake to Ben and Darius. "It was so nice meeting you both. I can't wait to meet the others." With that, the man excuses himself from the room. Before the door can shut, Mae comes in, hurryingly sitting herself next to Ben.

"Sorry I'm late, what'd I miss?"

"Apparently, Ben has no idea about the project we're here to discuss." Claire tells her. Mae grimaces at that.

"Ah. Yes, well, that was a decision on my part. I knew Mr. Bowman had a meeting with you before him, so I thought he'd be more receptive with him here."

Ben exhales in annoyance. They're talking about him like he's not even here. That, and Mae basically just admitted to trying to manipulate him into staying. Which, of course, wouldn't be the first time, but still. It would also mean Darius was in on her little plan, though, he can't find it in him to be upset at that.

"Well, I'll summarize the project in three words: **Camp Cretaceous reunion**." Claire says emphatically.

…*What.*

"What?"

"Well, it's more complicated than that. The movie has nothing to do with our show." Darius explains quickly, seeing Ben becoming more and more confused. "It's just- The studio's draw for this movie is the CC cast all being in it- assuming, of course, you accept the role."

"Okay... I don't understand, why make a movie with all of us *now*?"

"I don't know if you know this, but the show has been trending since it was re-added to Netflix earlier this year." Mae adds on. "Everyone's more interested in all of you now than even when the show was on air."

"Huh. That *would* explain why I got stopped for photos and autographs more than normal when I was in New York." Ben muses aloud. Ben has never been the type to use social media, despite how much Mae insists it would be good for PR, so he definitely doesn't do any ego-scrolling or whatever. Without this meeting, he never would have guessed people were suddenly getting into Camp Cretaceous again.

“And while I know people would love to see a revival, I thought we should take a more… *unique* approach.” Claire explains, a playful lilt in her voice. “I’m just glad I was able to convince Simon to greenlight it. He wanted a timeskip story, despite the logistical nightmare. But an original, heartfelt story that happens to feature all of you? So much more meaningful than some cash grab, wouldn’t you say?”

“Sure. It's just- You don’t think by the time the film actually releases, the hype will have died?” Ben ponders, trying to look at all the angles.

“Oh, it will dwindle, no doubt. But if the PR team is to be believed, there will still be enough interest when it eventually hits theaters. Besides, the story isn't so weak it won't generate it's own interest.”

“That's good to hear. So, the girls have already signed on? I'm the last to join?”

“Well, Brooklynn hashed everything out on her end yesterday, Yaz is coming in tomorrow, as is Sammy who's flying in soon and they told me they’re definitely on board. I'm doing it, if you're wondering. So, yeah, pretty much.” Darius explains.

"And let me tell you, getting Sammy to come back from Texas was no easy feat." Claire sighs.

“Huh.”

No wonder Mae didn’t tell him herself. It’s… a lot to take in.

Ben won't lie, he's very tempted to say 'Yes' right now, no question. They had a lot of fun on the set of CC and wouldn't mind experiencing that again. And, frankly, it's been a while since he's been in a movie. The process of filming a movie versus television is very similar in many aspects, but there's just *something* about being on a movie set that makes the whole experience feel grander.

Mae even called this project a 'career changer.' Does she mean because it would be capitalizing on their show's current popularity? Or is she implying he might finally push beyond B-List status? In either case, all the more reason he should say 'Yes', right? She's never steered him wrong.

Then, all at once, an important detail surges to the front of his mind.

"Did- Did **Kenji** say he'll do it…?"

"Well, yes and no…" Darius answers cryptically, flinching the second Ben brought up the other man. Everyone in their little circle knows about Ben's whole 'avoid Kenji if possible' mindset, so Darius was probably expecting Ben to bring him up.

"What does that m-"

Before Ben can finish his question, the door to the room opens, and enters someone he's thought more of in the last couple of hours than he has in the last couple of years.

-eight years ago-

“H-hi! My name is Ben Pincus, and I’m playing the role of Sean!”

The meeting room is jam packed with people- writers, directors, the cast, and dozens of others. As Ben finishes his short intro, they all politely clap, a few of them laughing at his nervousness. After he takes his seat, his Mom who’s sitting behind him gives his shoulder an encouraging squeeze.

Sitting across and on either side of Ben are his new castmates. He's happy that six of them are all around the same age, and hopefully getting along won't be too difficult.

Ben smiles to himself, giddy about starting this new chapter in his life and his career. Assuming the pilot does well and they get picked up, this will be Ben’s biggest role yet. So far, he’s only been able to land commercials or one-episode roles. This will be his first time he’s playing a character for an extended period of time. Serialized television is a big step forward!

Heh, if this does well, maybe he can even get an agent.

The director and writers have already introduced themselves, and now it's the cast's turn. The adults insisted the six of them go first. Darius, Brooklynn, Sammy and Yaz (and now Ben) have all gone already, leaving one left.

The last kid to go is the taller boy sitting to Ben's right. He sits there with an expensive polo and gaudy sunglasses, looking very much like someone who thinks he's a celebrity. Every time someone finished their introductions, he golf clapped. Literally. A rather intimidating man who Ben assumes is the boy's dad sits behind him, though he doesn’t seem to pay attention to anything but the laptop he brought

with him.

Now that it's his son's turn, he closes the thing and watches him *intently*.

"Hey, everyone. I'm Kenji, the *star* of the show." The statement gets a good amount of laughs from the adults, and out of the corner of his eye, Ben sees a proud smirk now resting on that intimidating man's face. "Kidding, sorry. No, I'm Kenji Kon, and I'll be playing Ryan. Can't wait to work with you all."

Kenji takes his seat, and Ben, observant as he is, notices the boy's smile fade the second everyone was no longer looking at him. So, too, did his shoulders- drooping as if a weight had been lifted.

...what was that about?

Well, whatever it was, Ben gets the feeling he and Kenji *aren't* going to get along. 'Star of the show'? He said he's kidding, but he gets the feeling he wasn't. Ben was already put off by the way he's dressed- though knowing he's playing rich-boy Ryan, it's rather in character. If Kenji is anything like Ryan, Ben is sure they're not going to be friends.

Still, if they're going to be working together for a while, he should make an effort to at least be amicable.

"I like your glasses." Ben whispers to Kenji, saying the first thing to come to mind. Everyone else is currently paying attention to the adult cast members now introducing themselves.

"Huh? Oh. Thanks, man." Kenji replies timidly, maybe not expecting

Ben to talk to him. The taller boy doesn't say anything else, so Ben changes topics.

"Did you read the script yet?"

"Uh, sorta? Honestly, only the first half, probably."

"Same, I got too nervous to get through the whole thing." He lies. In fact, Ben was so excited that he read that script front-to-back several times over. He could recite all his lines without it at this point- not that he has that many. Still, he's trying to make friends, and Kenji seems a bit nervous talking to him for some reason.

"I got to the part where Paul teases Ryan about being scared of the lizard in the jeep." Kenji admits. "I kinda didn't wanna read more after that."

"Oh, I know which part you're talking about. To be fair, he was annoying Paul up until then." Ben supplies. Kenji grimaces at that.

"I know, but when I signed up, I didn't know Ryan is actually kind of a scaredy cat. They just told me he was a 'cool guy' who takes some warming up to."

"Well, they told me straight up, 'Sean is a wet blanket and a scaredy cat.' And hey, at least you get the coolest introduction out of all of us." For a brief second, a smile- not like the one the boy put on when he was introducing himself, but a softer, genuine one- crosses Kenji's face.

"You don't think it's too much? Coming into camp in a helicopter?"

“A little, but I think it sets up what to expect from Ryan pretty clearly.”

“Huh. That’s true.” Kenji muses. Suddenly, a glint of mischief is in the taller boy's eye. “Guess that’s better than barfing on the boat ride over, huh?”

Ben pouts. Kenji stifles a laugh at the sight, and Ben gets to see that smile again.

“Sorry, just messing with you.” Kenji practically wheezes out.

A snapping sound comes from behind and Kenji’s back goes ramrod straight and his shoulder squared. His eyes focus squarely on the director who’s been giving a short speech. Ben doesn’t have to look to know where that sound came from. It was pretty freaky- all at once, Kenji's demeanor shifted, and he's no longer like the guy he was just talking to.

Ben isn’t the most socially apt person, but even he knows that whole thing wasn’t normal. He doesn’t try to talk with Kenji for the rest of the meeting- at least, not while that man is watching.

Though, from that brief, genuine conversation he had with him, Ben starts to think that maybe Kenji isn’t as bad as he initially thought.

-present-

Seeing Kenji on TV for a minute and seeing him in front of him are very different experiences. At least with the TV, Ben can shut it off whenever he wants. Here, he'd literally have to get up and leave to avoid the other- that, or jump out the window directly behind him. As it is, he starts to unconsciously scratch at his arms a bit before mentally slapping himself.

As Kenji saunters in, all swagger and confidence, Ben considers jumping out the window option the most viable.

"Darius! C'mere, bro!" Kenji sings, holding his arms open wide. Darius smiles as he makes his way over and embraces the taller man.

"We went rock climbing and had dinner last week. You're acting like I haven't seen you in ages."

"Ugh, anytime apart feels like forever, man." The pair chuckle at the quip, and Ben just sits there, trying to process everything. Kenji's eyes train on Claire, and once again, his arms are wide open. "Oh, if I knew my favorite screenwriter was on board, I would have said 'Yes' immediately."

"Yeah, yeah. Good to see you, kid." Claire laughs as they embrace. "You just missed Simon. I'm sure he'd have liked to catch up."

"Ah, I see him often enough. Just surprised he didn't tell me about all this himself."

Then, Kenji's eyes focus squarely on Ben.

His smile drops and a slightly uncomfortable expression settles on his face. His hands fidget on either side of him. This is very different to the Kenji that just greeted Darius and Claire. Heck, this is different from the abrasive Kenji he's seen at events the past few years. This is more like the nervous Kenji he met all those years ago, in a room just like this.

Then in an instant, Kenji's lopsided grin is back, and Ben is snapped out of his thoughts, firmly rooting him in the present.

“Hey.” Is all Ben offers, looking in Kenji’s direction, but refusing to meet his eyes.

“Hey. It's been what, a year?”

“Two.” He reminds him curtly. "Comic Con, remember?" The tension is palpable, and as it is, he knows he’s probably making things awkward for everyone else in the room.

Curiously, when Ben happens to glance Claire’s way, the look on her face says she’s very much *interested* in this conversation, for whatever reason.

“Right, I remember." Something shifts in Kenji's eyes. "Wait... don't tell me you're also joining the film?”

The disbelieving voice throws Ben. Does... Kenji *also* not know what's going on? It sounds like he at least knew it was a film, but he seems as much in the dark about the other details as Ben is. He didn't seem all that surprised to see Darius, but then, he *did* seemed surprised to see Claire.

“Maybe? I don’t know." Ben admits. "I’m not even sure what the movie is *about.* All they’ve told me is Darius and the girls from *Camp* have agreed to be in it.” Instinctively, he looks to Mae, who returns his gaze sheepishly.

“Ah. Yes, well, your agent Kelly was on board-” Mae starts to explain to Kenji, but is cut off by Claire.

“It’s a romance movie.”

“What- really?” Ben asks, not expecting that answer. He's never worked on one of those before. Is this what Mae meant by 'career changer?' Are they considering Ben for the male lead?

“Well, who's going to be playing the leads?” Kenji asks before he can. Ben grimaces.

So far, Ben's CV contains a variety of roles: a doctor, a cop, a zombie survivor, and of course, a teenage camper, to name a few. The show he's currently filming has him as a man trapped in the wild, living off the land. The closest he's ever gotten to play any kind of 'romance' role was in an episode of 'Drama Hospital' where he played a guy with a dying girlfriend.

“Ben, I want you to know, I wouldn’t have agreed to this meeting unless-” Mae starts again, but this time, Ben cuts her off himself, growing more anxious the more they pussyfoot around the topic.

“Who? Who's playing them? Tell me.”

Is it him and Brooklynn? Or Sammy? Is it Kenji and Brooklynn?

Cliche, but not unexpected. It would be pretty interesting seeing action hero Yaz step into the romance genre. Honestly, no matter who the leading lady ends up being, Ben isn't sure he'd want to sign on if Kenji is the leading man instead of him. Darius, he'd be fine with- Happy, even. Kenji? Not so much.

"The film is called **'In The Stars'** and it's a gay romance set in the 80s. I want **you** and **Kenji** to be the **romantic leads**." Claire answers, her eyes flitting between everyone.

Oh.

Ben once again glances at Mae, who looks at him with a mixture of hope and concern.

He told her earlier this year he wanted to publicly come out and hopefully play his first openly gay character. He knows she's been feeling studios out for a while, but so far, he hadn't heard word of anything being offered. He's also made clear to her he'd like to dip his toes into the romance genre eventually, though if it could be as a gay character, that would be two birds with one stone.

This is the break he was waiting for.

Never would he imagine it would be opposite *him*.

All this secrecy suddenly makes sense. *Kenji* is why she was so hesitant to say much of anything. *Kenji* is why she wanted him to hear the offer in a meeting. Did she know he was going to show up? Ben is sure he would have refused to come if he knew in advance the guy was going to be here. She knew Darius was going to be here, so that isn't farfetched.

Despite his current feelings towards the man, his immediate instinct is to look at Kenji- to gauge the other's reaction to this information.

From what he can tell by his body language, he's just as floored by the information as Ben. That said, Kenji isn't protesting or laughing it off like he thought he would. In fact, he seems to be taking this rather well. Still, the other is not so subtly wiping his hands on his expensive pant legs, and his posture and demeanor conveys vulnerability.

The most telling thing, however, is the other man's eyes. They alone would tell Ben everything- expressions and emotions that only Ben saw, in moments that he hasn't even thought of in years. As it is, those eyes meet his, also searching. Before him stands something he hasn't seen in quite some time- a pensive Kenji.

It suddenly occurs to him that the shorter man is doing the same thing he is. He wants to know what *Ben* thinks of all this, waiting on his next word with baited breath. He's not sure why, but he gets the feeling that his own answer to the role offer might determine Kenji's. Ben isn't sure he likes having that power right now. He knows it isn't just *Kenji* that's waiting on what he says next. Judging from how they're now all looking at him, how they move forward with the project may be determined on if he agrees or not.

Ben has to remind himself that Mae knows best, and wouldn't put him in this awkward position if she didn't think this wasn't a good move. And, he reminds himself that he does have the final say in all things, regardless if he'd be throwing away the role of a lifetime.

Darius has been a rock for Ben in the turbulent ocean that is show-business. They both had to navigate the kind of life that comes from going from child-actor to proper actor, and for better or for worse, they've always been there for each other. He, and the rest of the 'Camp Fam' (as Sammy insists on calling the six of them) know of Ben's tiff

with Kenji, though the details of why that is remains (mostly) only between him and the taller man.

What he's saying is Darius and Mae know that this is a *difficult* position for him, and they *still* want him on board.

But the only thing that overrides all of those thoughts, the only thing that makes him even consider doing this after learning the 'catch', is that *Kenji* knows how difficult this would be for him.

The fact he’s still here, even after what was said between them the last few years, even after years of actively avoiding one another, waiting on what Ben says next before he makes his own move, tells Ben something has **changed** with the taller man.

Not that it should matter, because nothing has changed with Ben.

But still. He can't pass this opportunity up just because of... everything.

So, despite his better judgment- despite almost every fiber of his being telling him to walk out of here and wait for something else, the words that leave his mouth are:

“Tell me more about it.”

And everyone seems to release the same, collective breath.

In his peripheral, Ben can see a small smile on Kenji's lips.

Ben, unsure of what he's getting into, feels like the walls are closing in and he's gotten himself trapped somewhere he shouldn't.

Chapter End Notes

My Own Soul's Warning by The Killers

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks so much for reading!

I really wanted to make an 'Actors AU' for this show since season 3, but I wanted to wait for it to be over first. Now that it is (Also, can't wait for the interactive special coming soon!) I figured it would be a good time to finally churn this out!

I'm aiming for this to be 14 alternating POV chapters, with an epilogue at the end. I originally planned to put out one chapter every 2 days (as a NaNoWriMo challenge for myself) but that may prove too difficult. Still, I'll update when I can!

Chapter 2 should be out by Wednesday, 11/2
EDIT: Things got busy real fast, so I'm pushing CH2 to Saturday, 11/5! Sorry for the wait!

When We Were Young

Chapter Summary

Kenji is a man with a plan (sort of)

Chapter Notes

Hello! We're gonna start alternating POVs now! Hope you enjoy!

Kenji POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kenji has never seen this expression on Ben's face before.

It may have been a while since he's seen him in person, but Kenji had spent several years before that working with the guy on a show- hours of rehearsing and filming and hanging out. Along with… *other* activities. Not to mention, he keeps up with literally every single project that features Ben one way or another- not that anyone but Brooklynn knows that of course.

Suffice it to say, Kenji knows what kinds of faces Ben can make.

But the one the taller man is sporting (God, he can't believe Ben is taller than him now), as he listens to Claire go over the general plot points of her new film, is some strange cross section of intrigued and bitter. His brows are somehow both raised and furrowed, his mouth in a tight line with the slightest hint of a pout. He's fidgeting with his hands under the table, but he's listening to every word the woman is saying.

And, even though he's grown into a literal hollywood hunk, he still looks adorable in Kenji's eyes.

“-so ultimately, he’s stuck between a rock and a hard place. A normal life without his lover, or a struggling but happy life, where he has to hide in secret, but with his lover by his side. Which does he pick?” Claire explains.

“I know which *I’d* pick.” Ben says, not missing a beat. If Kenji didn’t know better, he’d swear Ben said that to *him* and not the red-head. It makes Kenji’s palms sweaty again.

"Of course you do. You know everything." Kenji mutters, purely on instinct. He internally chastises himself for not catching the words before he said them. Of course, the comment earns him a hard glance from the taller man.

“Maybe, but Kenji’s character, Louis, doesn’t. It’s a point of contention with him and your character, Peter.”

“I can see the appeal of such a plot, for sure.” Ben admits. He wrings his hands then leans forward onto the table, his expression more serious.

"Can I just ask... why me and Kenji specifically? Why not Kenji and Darius? Or me and Darius?" Ben not so subtly glares his way for a second as he addresses Claire. On instinct, he glares right back. The woman nods in contemplation at the question before answering

"I had considered all options, of course. We didn't feel the need for chemistry reads because all of you were on a show together before. Through Mae, I understood that you were looking for a gay leading role, so you were the obvious choice for one half. In the end," she looks at Darius apologetically, "I went with Kenji because of the height difference, and the casting director agreed with me. No offense, Mr.

Bowman."

"Some taken, but I get it." Darius smiles, despite her implying he's too short for the role.

Ah, so it isn't his *acting* chops that landed him the second lead, but his height, which he has no control over. It wouldn't be the first time, and Kenji figures it won't be the last.

“Alright. Let’s say I *were* to sign on. What kind of timeline are we looking at here?” Ben asks, doubt still lingering in his voice.

Kenji perks up at the question.

Oh? Does this mean Ben is actually considering it…?

As Mae and Claire begin explaining things in more detail and hashing things out, Kenji can’t help but keep his eyes fixed Ben. Now *this* is an expression Kenji has seen him make before- focused. Kenji is certain the other is still on the fence about the whole thing (most definitely because of him) but the fact he’s intently listening makes Kenji feel at least a little hopeful.

He needs to have a talk with Brooklynn. She didn't say anything. Neither did his agent, for that matter. She only mentioned that he was offered the lead role in a Masrani film- which isn't unusual for him, considering his long professional history with the man. That, and, he's literally Kenji's godfather. Conveniently left out was the fact that Claire Deering is attached to it, not to mention that Darius, Ben, and the girls from Camp Cretaceous are also on board.

And she certainly failed to mention that he and Ben were to be the romantic leads.

That detail is not at all a problem to Kenji, mind you. He's been in a few romance films before, but... this one was something he's been waiting for.

He can't believe Ben is still here, listening to the pitch. If this were months ago, the taller man would have ran out the door the second Kenji showed his face. Amazing still is the fact he's listening to Claire's pitch, despite her mentioning they'd be the Co-Leads. Ben must really be interested- at least enough to ignore the fact he would be spending so much time with Kenji.

Being in another project with Ben is honestly more than enticing, despite the state of their relationship. To say he's missed the other would be an understatement, and spending months filming together would be the perfect way for them to reconnect. Kenji doesn't expect much from this reunion- he dare not seek forgiveness, not that he would get it, but… if they could at least start *talking* again, maybe even be *friends* again, he'd be all the happier for it.

Now if only he could unlearn his tendency to immediately react to anything the other says by sassing him. It's just habit at this point- a defense mechanism he used since their falling out. He imagines that on Ben's end, it's just as natural, especially since he means it.

Without thinking, he makes the mistake of glancing at Darius, who is not-so-subtly looking at him with knowing eyes. Kenji averts his own gaze as quickly as he can.

As if to save him from all this, his phone in his shirt pocket starts vibrating.

“Shoot. Uh, I’m gonna take this outside.” Kenji says, looking at the number calling him. It might just be his nerves, but he can feel everyone's eyes on him as he leaves, and doesn’t stop feeling it until the door closes behind him.

The moment he answers, his mood sours as the person on the other end starts speaking.

“Kenji? Did you get a new phone? Do you have my number blocked or something?” the familiar, and unwelcome, voice asks.

“What are you doing using my assistant’s phone, Daniel?”

“Daniel?!” The man screeches.

“That’s your name, isn’t it? Oh, tell me you didn’t go to my house. Did you happen to catch Rebel on the way in?”

“Kenji… I am your father. How dare you-”

“You must really want something if you're resorting to cornering my assistant.” Kenji interrupts. “What do you want?”

“I just wanted to call my son. Can't I do that?”

Kenji scoffs. It's been years since that kind of comment would have made him feel bad. Now, it just irks him to no end.

“Spit it out or I’m hanging up.” He can hear the man almost drop the phone.

“Wait! Sorry. You’re right. I um- I need another-”

“Another ‘loan’, right?” Kenji pinches the bridge of his nose and exhales in irritation. “Fine. But this is the *last* time. How much do you want?”

“Ten thousand. I need to pay-”

“I don’t care. I’ll have Rebel deposit you the money.”

“Thank you, son. You don’t know-”

Kenji hangs up without another word. He hurriedly shoves the phone into his pants pocket, his day almost certainly ruined.

It seems, that for whatever reason, fate has decided that Kenji hears from people he hasn’t had contact with in a long time. One was welcome, if not a bit awkward, the other… just plain annoying.

God, he was having a pretty good day not a minute ago, but that man just had to call…

He takes a moment to compose himself, not wanting any of the others to see him in such a state. Before he can open the door and head back

in, it swings open on its own. Standing in front of him is the towering figure that is Ben, with that adorable pout on his lips again, and everyone else in tow.

Earlier, Ben was sitting, so he couldn't really gauge how much the other had grown since they last spoke. During the final season of CC, Ben was around five-eight while Kenji was a whopping six-one. Kenji grew to be six-three and judging from the way he has to crane his neck to look up at him, Ben must be around six-six now at least.

Kenji doesn't know why, but their height difference being reversed makes his heart beat faster.

"Can I get by?" Ben asks, his voice disinterested. He doesn't even look Kenji in the eye.

"What, can't manage a 'please?'" Kenji retorts a little awkwardly, though he still shuffles out of the way. Ben walks past him with Mae following close behind, a folder in her hand. The woman is the only one who offers him or the others a goodbye.

Damn. He didn't even get a chance to talk with him.

Tch. Would he have listened to you? Every word out of your mouth so far was rude.

"These are for you." Claire pipes up, handing Kenji a folder similar to Ben's. "Wasn't expecting you to show up early, but I had all the paperwork ready in advance. Go over them with your agent if you need to, but it's your basic contract, payment agreement, NDA. You know the drill."

“Sure. Thanks, Claire.”

Just as she’s about to leave, she instead turns around and faces Kenji directly.

“I have to ask… it didn’t look like you two were on the best terms. Is it going to be a problem?” Claire pointedly questions.

“Uh, no! Not at all. At least, not from me, anyway.” Kenji stumbles out. “Wait, does that mean–”

“Great. Can’t wait to hear back from everyone. It’s been good seeing you, kid. Hopefully, we’ll be seeing more of each other.” She says with a smile before she finally goes.

Kenji grumbles under his breath, still upset that his day took a 180. His phone call wasn’t all that long, but he missed the last part of that meeting. Did Ben agree to join everyone? Or did he-

“He didn’t sign anything yet, if that’s what you’re wondering.” The familiar voice of Darius tells him. When he looks at his bro, he has the same knowing look on his face from earlier.

“Oh. Cool.” Kenji looks in the direction Ben headed. "He seemed interested though, huh?"

“Just don't hold your breath. Who knows what he's going to do.” The other tells him honestly. Darius moves himself a little closer and lowers his voice so only Kenji can hear him. “Why were you here?"

“I could ask the same.” Kenji quips.

"My meeting was before Ben's, but Mae asked me to stick around to help persuade him. She told me you were *supposed* to come later."

"I wasn't busy, so I came early. Besides, does it matter? I'm gonna do the film, and from the fact that he took the paperwork with him, so is he." The look Darius gives him makes Kenji shrink in on himself a bit, the other having that effect on him when he's particularly disappointed.

"It's always nice to see you, but you showing up early could have sent him running." Darius states, matter-of-factly. "And I know it's mutual, but you being passive aggressive towards him certainly didn't help."

He knows. He knows he may have cost Masrani and Claire their dreams of a reunion by running his mouth and, well, *just existing.* But more importantly, he may have just steered Ben clear of a movie he certainly seemed interested in. Reconnecting with Ben -something he *does* want to do- was always going to be hard, but Kenji may be making things worse, all with the fewest exchange of words.

Kenji briefly remembers how he and Ben's last *real* conversation went- along with all the things that were said- and he wills himself not to think of it again.

Instead of replying to Darius, he starts walking, though the other follows close behind.

They meander through the halls, nothing but silence being exchanged. Kenji wonders if Darius has anything more to say, though he's not sure he wants to know what it is. As they turn a corner, a few employees walk past them, whispering and smiling at them as they do.

“You would think people would be used to seeing us together.” Kenji jokes. "Or maybe they're fans of ours."

"Too bad they don't know you're getting married." Darius mumbles.

"I'm- What?? Where did you hear *that?"*

"There are rumors that you and Brooklynn are moving out of your current home and into a new one- saying it's a sign you guys are tying the knot soon."

Kenji had yet to hear this rumor. He'd laugh at how off base it really is, but then, he'd have to explain to Darius why. Instead, he gives the other a wry smile and shrugs in a noncommittal way.

"Eh. Don't believe everything you hear."

Kenji makes a note of the way Darius smiles as he says that. What that's about, he's not sure, but he'll take it as a sign the other is at least letting it go.

"Anyway, D, I think I should head-"

“Are you ever going to tell me what happened?” Darius asks abruptly, the question catching him off guard. Kenji looks around, wondering if anyone else heard that, but no one else is around and those passersby have long gone.

The question is vague, and he thought they moved past the topic of Ben, but Kenji knows exactly what the other is asking.

“I *did* tell you. We had a spat after-”

“After that interview about the season 3 finale. I remember.” Darius finishes for him.

“Then why-”

“I want to know the *real* reason, Kenj.” Darius puts a hand on his arm, the gesture somehow both comforting and almost threatening. “It wasn’t a simple ‘spat.’ Not from the way Ben was afterwards. And honestly, you weren't exactly yourself either.”

And just like that, Kenji feels like crap all over again. He knows what happened affected Ben so adversely they had to postpone filming for a couple of days, and he felt horrible then too. These aren't exactly pleasant memories, and he certainly doesn't want to have to explain it to someone, even if that someone is his best friend in the whole world.

When Kenji doesn’t answer him, Darius continues.

“He managed to pull through for the last two seasons, but he never hung out with all of us again. Even now. I keep asking *him* what had happened, but he always avoids it.”

“I know… it’s *my* fault.” Kenji admits before he can stop himself. Despite knowing better, he keeps talking. "I'm surprised he didn't leave the second I showed up."

Kenji, once again, does not offer more. Realizing he won't be getting an answer today, Darius just sighs in resignation.

"Look, I'm not gonna *make* you tell me. And you know I'll always support you. But Ben is my friend too, and I don't want to be the one convincing him to join up if this is going to be a bad experience for him."

Darius doesn't know it, but those words shame Kenji more than he can imagine.

"And, just saying- it would help me and the others get onboard with helping you guys make up if we *knew* what this whole thing between you is."

Oh, that's not going to happen. They... really might not want to remain friends with Kenji if they knew. Still, if he can't even tell Darius, who can he tell?

"Who said I wanted to make up?" Kenji quips, because being emotionally open isn't exactly a Kenji hallmark. Once again, Darius gives him this *look,* and Kenji can no longer keep up the act. "I know." Kenji relents. "That means a lot to me, D. And one day, I promise, I'll fess up. Just…"

"Not in a hallway where anyone can hear us?" Darius finishes for him. As he says this, another group of passing employees eyes them. Kenji laughs.

"Yeah, something like that."

Darius eyes him funnily, like he's debating something. Suddenly, he reaches for Kenji's phone and punches something in. When he hands it back, Kenji sees it's a new contact.

"I'm not gonna give you *his* number. But… I figure it wouldn't hurt for you to have Mae's."

Oh, what would he do without this guy?

"You're the best, D."

"Don't make me regret this, Kenj." Darius smirks, though Kenji takes his words to heart.

--

"Mr Kon! I haven't seen you in a while." The doorman to the apartment building greets. He lets Kenji in, and the warm air from the heated lobby is welcome on Kenji's cold skin.

"Same, Jerry. Just going up to grab a few things."

"Ah… I see." The older man says, a twinkle of mischief in his eye.

Kenji flinches at the tone. He knows he hasn't been all that subtle with moving his things out of the penthouse, but even the aging doorman seems to know his business. He wonders if he's under the same

impression that Darius was- that he and Brooklynn are moving out together because they're 'getting married.'

When, in actuality, Kenji alone is moving out.

Ignoring that whole encounter with the doorman, Kenji heads up. The second he gets off the elevator, he can hear a familiar voice yelling from a distant room. He unlocks the front door and it's like his 'girlfriend' is standing next to him from how loud she is. He'd hate to be whoever it is she's actually talking to.

"I already told you, I'm not missing the Esther Stone premiere! Yeah, I know the press might be bad after the whole–" She pauses to listen to whoever is on the other end of the line. "But that's beside the point! I schmoozed my butt off at that afterparty to secure an invite, and I'm not missing it for the world, regardless of what some paps might ask."

Ah, Brooklynn. She knows exactly what she wants and won't take no for an answer.

Kenji couldn't have asked for a better 'girlfriend.' Having someone by his side who can command a room, escape annoying reporters, or do any number of insane things like she can has been a godsend during their 'relationship.' She must be pacing around her room, red in the face, telling her agent off for the fifth time today. It's a good thing he had his own room to lock himself in on her bad days.

If it isn't obvious, Kenji and Brooklynn aren't *actually* dating. At one point in time, they had briefly gone out, but after it ended, they decided to keep up the pretense since everyone considered them the 'it' couple. It did mean neither of them could date anyone else for the past few years, but it's not like their schedules would have allowed for much of that anyway. The pair even moved into a swanky penthouse together a few years ago, and the press ate it up. He made sure there

were separate rooms, not that anyone would know.

Despite not being able to date anyone for real, he can't say it's been a bad experience. It's just a little funny to him that he has to act for his job *and* when he's walking red carpets with his supposed lover. At least in their home, he can be himself.

But after years of this farce, Kenji has decided he wants to ‘break up’ and settle into a life that isn’t next to Brooklynn. That, and, maybe he can actually start an actual relationship, you know? After all, he’s also decided he’s going to officially *come out,* now ready to tell the world he's Bi. He came to terms with his sexuality early into his and Brooklynn's ‘relationship,' and the girl has been nothing but supportive. Though, it was certainly a factor in why their 'real' relationship came to an end.

He hoped she would be just as supportive of him wanting to end this arrangement of theirs as she was when they entered said arrangement.

When he sat her down and asked her what she thought, she couldn’t stop smiling, telling him how proud she was and that she was 100% on board.

Too bad that Brooklynn isn’t who he came ‘home’ to today, instead being more-or-less greeted by head-strong professional version of her. She’s still ranting on the phone, probably pumped full of caffeine. Her back is toward him, her phone resting on her shoulder. Her prosthetic arm rest on the counter, surrounded by a bunch of paper work.

He doesn’t bother her, moving his way through this place he’s called home for the past two years. When he enters the room that was once his bedroom, he sighs as he looks at it bare of any of his furniture or stuff. Everything is either already at his new place or in boxes in the corner.

He emerges from the room with what little remains and almost drops everything when Brooklynn is suddenly standing in front of him.

“Whoa. Uh, hey.”

“Can you believe Roxie wanted me to skip the Esther Stone premiere? She was going on about the ‘potentially awkward press questions.’”

“I mean, she has a point. And I still can't believe you told your manager about our plan.”

Brooklynn downright glares at him.

“I am not missing that movie, Kenj.”

“We can watch it after it comes out, Bwookie-Bear. It doesn’t have to be the Hollywood premiere.” Brooklynn rolls her eyes at the nickname.

“Sure, *Kenji-Wenji*, but that means I have to wait longer.” She tosses her phone on the counter, next to her prosthetic arm, and grabs a coffee mug off the kitchen island and situates herself there. “Besides, it would be trouble if people saw us watching a movie together so soon after we ‘broke up.’”

"Well, wouldn't it also be weird when people find out about both of us being in Claire Deering's new movie?" He tells her, his tone mischievous.

"Ah, so you found out." She states. "Your agent told me to not say anything until your meeting today. And you know, I will always keep my word when it comes to Kelly."

"I know, you love reminding me."

Sighing, he puts his boxes on the island and takes a seat next to her.

“So… you’re still on board with the plan?” He asks timidly.

“Kind of late now to be asking me that, isn’t it?” She quips with a smile. He returns it. “Of *course* I am, Kenj. I know you've wanted to do this for a while now.”

“It’s not because I don’t like living together or anything.” he clarifies quickly. "You've been a great fake-girlfriend."

“And you've been a perfectly adequate fake-boyfriend.” She teases.

“I’m just ready to finally let everyone see the *real* me.”

Brooklynn smiles at that and shift topics. “So, how’s the new place?”

“Pretty nice. Not as big as this, but the elevator stops right in the apartment.”

“Convenient, if not a little dangerous. Imagine a stalker getting on and showing up in the middle of your living room.”

“Ugh, don’t put that idea in my mind, B. At least that building has actual security instead of outdated doormen like Jerry.” Brooklynn chuckles at the quip.

“Speaking of Jerry, did he give you this weird look when you came up?”

“Oh my god, yes. He did that to you, too?”

“Every time I’ve seen him for the past few days.” She gets up and gets herself another cup of java. “I don’t think it helps that some rumors are coming out about us.”

“Figured they would have. According to Darius, however, they're under the impression we're going to tie the knot."

"Oooh. Yikes. Maybe that's why my manager was so adamant I skip the premier. Which I'm not, by the way." Brooklynn smiles.

"I don't think it helps you've been wearing that ring the past few weeks." He gestures to the amber-inlayed wooden ring Brooklynn touts on her ring finger. She observes it and smiles.

"Can't a girl wear a pretty ring without it meaning something? Sheesh. The weirdest rumors crop up over nothing." She rolls her eyes. He notices her admiring the thing for a second, a small smile on her lips. He doesn't bring it up.

"Well, in two days, they're gonna get more than just a 'rumor,' that's for sure."

"I can't believe you're going to give this exclusive to Gray Mitchell of all people. He's a Youtuber. Why not go to a bigger news outlet?"

"Hey, don't forget your roots. I was a diehard Brooklander before you started acting." She rolls her eyes, a smile on her lips. "Since he's Zach Mitchell's brother, I figured he won't be too invasive about this kind of thing."

"Sure, but people had already figured out Zach was Bi when he agreed to do 'Love, Simon' which was months before he formally came out. You haven't done anything to suggest you're sexuality, unless you have a whole catalog of work I don't know about."

"First of all, that sounds vaguely like you're accusing me of doing porn or something." Brooklynn shrugs. "Second, it shouldn't matter if I've done a queer role or not. Bi actors do all kinds of roles. Besides, I'm literally going to be playing a Bi character in Claire's new movie."

"True enough." she resettles into her seat, a second mug balanced in her hand this time. She offers it to him and he takes it gratefully. One bad habit he's developed from 'dating' Brooklynn for so long is drinking coffee at any time of day. He knows he's going to be up all night if he drinks it, but it's second nature to him to take the cups she offers.

"So," she starts again, "I heard you ran into Ben at Masrani studios today." Kenji almost does a spit take.

“How??”

“Darius texted me. Plus, Rebel mentioned it when he was here.” She tells him nonchalantly. Suddenly, her eyes widen and she turns to him. “Oh, I almost forgot. Your dad-”

“I already dealt with him.” He answers quickly. “If he comes around again, just call the cops.”

"I was going to, but Rebel said not to. The poor kid seemed pretty rattled."

"Yeah, well, my dad has the effect on people."

Brooklynn just nods at that, not talking about that incident further.

“Anyway… how was seeing **Ben**?"

Kenji grumbles again.

“That bad, huh? Did you guys fight?”

“No, just the usual unpleasant exchanges. It wasn't bad. He didn't even leave the room when I showed up.”

“Wow, nice. So what was that grumbling about?”

“He didn’t agree to anything yet.”

“Hmm. I really thought Darius being there would have sold it." Kenji rolls his eyes. He figures she would know that too. "I wonder if you showing up might have prompted this indecision.”

“That’s what Darius thinks, too.” Kenji laments. “Though I'm *sure* he told you that when you texted him." He teases, earning him an eyeroll from her.

"Gee, I wonder why Ben is so rude to you." She deadpans.

"But like I said," Kenji continues, ignoring her dig, "he seemed interested, even after learning I was going to be in it *and* that we'd be playing lovers.”

“Interesting. That's an improvement, at least." After a moment, a look of realization passes on her face. "Wait, so you *are* doing it?.”

“Well, you and the others have already agreed. And yeah, maybe I was blindsided… but I think Louis is a good role for me.” Brooklynn’s expression softens at that, knowing the meaning behind his words.

A while ago, he told Brooklynn and no one else of his desire to finally play a queer character. The timing of everything couldn't be better- what with their plan coming along and Kenji being offered the role. Still, it's a big step- one that could make or break his career. He doesn't realize he's doing it, but he starts wiping his palms on his pant leg, his cup of coffee forgotten.

Suddenly, Brooklynn's face is close, her forehead now resting on his.

He sighs at the touch.

The gesture stirs a cocktail of emotions in him. After her accident, Brooklynn would have anxiety attacks- waking in the middle of the night startled, bouts of crying, or clutching her arm complaining of phantom pains. He wasn't there for every incident, but he'd like to think when he *was,* he helped calm her down. His mother used to do something that always worked on him- touch their foreheads and breath together. Sometimes it worked right away, sometimes it took more than an hour, but he patiently sat with Brooklynn every time until she was more relaxed. Since then, it's something they do when the other is feeling particularly stressed.

Right now, Brooklynn seems to think he needs it- and he won't question it. She's always been better at reading situations than him anyway.

“No matter what you do, I'll support you, Kenj.”

That's the second time he's hearing something like that today. Kenji starts tearing up a little, happy he has such good friends. He smiles at her, the girl returning it. She and him may bicker at times, but that’s because they’re best friends and have been living together for years. Underneath that mildly bratty attitude is a genuine, loving soul, and Kenji is so glad she’s been a part of his life.

Now, there's a certain blue eyed man he needs to get used to being in his life again, and despite the uncertainty of the tenuous situation they find themselves in, he honestly can't wait to see him again.

--

Kenji ended up staying awake later than he should have. Damn coffee.

Since he was up anyway and had nothing better to do, he spent the time devising a way he could see Ben again.

He knows what you're thinking- *Didn't Brooklynn and Darius say you might be adversely affecting his decisions?*

Well, maybe Kenji isn't as smart as them, but he has a gut feeling that it's resting on *him* to steer Ben on the path to signing that contract and starring in that gay movie with him. And, if nothing else, the idea of being able to see the other again excites him- though he'll never admit it to the man in question. Besides, if Ben doesn't sign on, the role could go to someone like Zach, and he definitely doesn't want to be in a movie with that guy.

The plan he settles on is this: Show up to where Ben is filming and invite him to lunch when he has a break- an olive branch of sorts. He knows where he'll be thanks to Mae helping him out, though she did warn him to, and he quotes, 'not do anything stupid.'

Kenji totally *won't. Probably. Okay, he totally* might*, if his track record is anything to go by, but still- He feels he needs to* try.

The only issue is that Ben is filming at Dodgson studios today and Kenji doesn't have a pass.

But let's not forget: Kenji is an actor, and a damn good one at that.

When he pulls up to the lot, in his new blue BMW and dressed like he's late for a meeting, the guard was only mildly reluctant to let him in. It probably helped that he seemed to recognize Kenji, since he has filmed at this studio before. With a pleading look and what Brooklynn

calls his 'puppy-dog eyes', Kenji is in.

Sucker.

He drives around the lot, careful not to run over various film crews going from set to set, until he finds soundstage 5. He parks his car and makes sure to straighten his clothes out, then heads inside with no hesitation. That's the key to sneaking into places- act like you're supposed to be there and not drawing attention to yourself.

The soundstage has been converted into one large set- a jungle of some kind. Many of the crew have jackets and hats that have the title of the show, ‘Survival’ sprawled on them. From that, Kenji guesses it’s some kind of wilderness/action series. The only reason he doesn't know is because it hasn't aired yet, so either it's a streaming services' show or it's a limited cable series.

Either way, he's proud of Ben.

“Quiet on set!” Yells the AD. Following the voice, Kenji finds where they're filming and saunters his way over there.

When he reaches the camera crew, he stands behind them and watches in awe of the scene in front of him. Standing in a clearing in this ‘jungle,’ a man with a headband and a staff faces off with a massive brute. The guy has to be a foot taller than the other.

“Action!” The two men immediately descend on one another, the choreography of the fight intense. Of course, it’s being filmed in such a way that the impact of each hit will look harder than it actually is, but from firsthand experience, Kenji knows stunt work of any kind is difficult.

While on Camp Cretaceous, stunts weren't all that demanding, so he did them all himself. Years later, as he was filming a movie, he once again tried doing his own stunts. Long story short- he almost died, so he never did it again.

Honestly, Kenji doesn't know how Yaz can stand it. After CC finished, she went to a stunt school and has been doing that kind of work exclusively ever since. She has the most credits out of all of them, even doing work in foreign films and shows. Though personally, Kenji would rather have a smaller CV and not have to worry about breaking a leg from doing a backflip 20 feet in the air.

After another moment of nonstop exchanges, the smaller man with the staff knocks down the brute and hovers over him triumphantly.

Now that they've stopped moving, and the cameras are focus on their faces, Kenji can see who they are:

The brute is Toro, a stuntman he's worked with before.

And the man with the bandana is Ben.

"Cut! Good job guys! Take a break!"

Ben helps Toro up, but then a bunch of the crew start running around setting up for the next scene. In the sea of moving people, Kenji loses sight of them.

"Shoot." Kenji curses, moving his way through the crew to see if he

can’t find Ben again. After bumping into a boom-operator, the gaffer, and a set hand, Kenji is about ready to give up and head outside.

“Kenji? What are you doing here?” A deep voice calls for him. He turns around and is face-to-face with Toro.

“Oh! Hey, man. It’s been a minute, huh?” Kenji offers a fist bump, which Toro gratefully returns.

“Yeah, I haven't seen you since ‘Mind Control’. You filming something on the lot today?” *Oooh, Kenji wish he hadn't asked.*

“Not exactly… I’m actually looking for-”

“What the *hell* are you doing here?” a voice asks offendedly from behind him.

Kenji turns around and is confronted with a mildly angry looking Ben.

“Ah… Of course.” Toro says, a tiny bit of knowing in his voice. “I won’t hold you up. See you later, man.”

“Yeah seeya.” Kenji replies absentmindedly, his focus still on Ben.

They stand there awkwardly for a moment. Kenji had a plan- invite Ben to lunch and see where that went. But seeing Ben, all sweaty from that fight scene, looking down at him with a furrowed brow, Kenji forgot everything he wanted to say.

Unexpectedly, Ben grabs him by the arm and drags him outside. Kenji doesn't resist.

The moment they turn the corner, away from prying eyes, the taller man gets all up in his space, his nose flaring.

“Did you know I was here or something? How’d you even get on the lot?”

“I uh–”

“And *WHY* are you even here??” Ben's voice would get a little screechy when he yells, and even though they're now in their twenties and their voices have deepened, he's delighted to find it still does. Paired with his now massive frame, it's downright hilarious. Kenji resists laughing.

“Why… did you drag me over here?” He counters.

“Too many people watching. Now, answer my questions, Kon.”

Oh. We’re on a last names basis, apparently.

“I wanted to take you to lunch, Pincus.” Kenji admits, a small smirk playing on his lips.

“Lunch??” Ben asks, bewildered.

“Yeah, you know. The meal you eat in the middle of the day.” Kenji quips, which seems to incense Ben further.

“Shut up. So, what? You thought you’d sneak in-”

“I didn’t *sneak* in.”

“- and just invite me to eat with you? Do you know how insane that is? What if I had to film all day?”

“Oh. *Do you*?”

“... no, but that’s besides the point.”

“So, you’re free for lunch.” Kenji states, not asks.

“I have to film one more scene.”

“And *then* you’re free for lunch.” Kenji sings in the asinine way he does when he wants to rile someone up.

Ben rolls his eyes then backs away, looking very much annoyed. Kenji resists smiling- it wasn't often, but one of his favorite things to do was pester Ben to the point where he’d pout or sulk. He never took it too far, always knowing when to let up so he really didn’t upset the guy.

Until ***that*** happened and he just seemed to always make Ben upset.

“What makes you think I’d *want* to eat with you?” Ben asks softly, no longer looking at Kenji. The question makes his chest ache, but Kenji pushes on.

“I just want to catch up. I wanna hear all about this badass show you’re doing. That, and, I'm starving and really wanna go eat.”

"Just go eat by yourself."

"Nah, company makes any meal better. Use to tell you that all the time, yeah?"

Ben’s expressions just barely softens. Like Kenji mentioned- he knows what kinds of faces Ben makes and what they mean. And he’s got Ben right where he wants him.

“Please, Ben?” Kenji tacks on, hoping his sincerity comes through.

The taller man scratches his arm absentmindedly, thinking. Ben shuts his eyes, and Kenji thinks he’s going to be driving away alone.

“Fine. But it's your treat.”

Oh, thank God.

Kenji really didn’t want to leave with nothing to show for his effort.

That, and, he didn't know what he was going to do if he had potentially lost Claire her second lead because he couldn't *not* bother Ben for a day.

"Of course, yeah. I was thinking we go to-"

"Ben?" A voice calls. The pair turn and find an AD looking at them. "Oh, you have comp-- Holy crap are you Kenji Kon??"

"The one and only." He replies cooly, immediately shifting into his 'celebrity persona.' Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Ben shake his head.

"Wow, it's so cool to–"

"Mateo. Are they ready for the next scene?" Ben interrupts.

"What?" The guy, Mateo, turns to Ben. "Oh! Yeah, they're waiting for you at make up."

"Well, let's go then."

"Right. Right." Mateo seems to snap out of his starstruck state and heads back inside with Ben. Before they can turn the corner, Ben grabs the hat off Mateo's head and throws it to Kenji.

"Wear that so people think you belong here."

Without another word, Ben and a confused Mateo leave.

Kenji is left standing there.

He smiles to himself, knowing he's slowly getting the other to warm up to him again.

--

The scene Ben is filming now is a two-man dialogue scene, Ben standing opposite to an older guy, who through context clues, Kenji figures out is supposed to be Ben's character's father. This must be a scene earlier in the show, because Ben no longer has his headband nor as many scars.

As Kenji watches, the first thought that crosses his mind is: Ben is an excellent actor.

He was always good, even during their time on CC, but he's really honed his craft in the years since they've last seen one another. He's expressive, but not overly so, and his delivery in some of these lines is so raw, Kenji can just feel the emotion dripping from every bit of dialogue.

Smiling to himself, Kenji can recall a time that wasn't the case.

-eight years ago-

It’s the second day of filming the pilot of Camp Cretaceous. The scene they're currently on is Sean (Ben) and Ryan (Kenji) getting to know one another better, the pair sitting on a bunk bed.

“That looks disgusting. What even is that?” Ryan inquires.

“This? It's called carob. It’s sweet like chocolate with none of the sugar. Want some?” He’s offered a bar that looks somewhat like chocolate but smells nothing like it.

“No, thanks. I think I’ll stick to actual chocolate.”

“Suit yourself. If you want, I also got carrot juice- *Shoot.* I’m so sorry.” Ben immediately turns to the director, who just smiles patiently at him. The PD yells ‘cut’ and the crew gets ready to reset.

“I know the words sound similar, Ben, but this is the fourth take.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” Ben apologizes again, and Kenji feels bad for the kid.

He knows for a fact that Ben knows his lines. Kenji had been struggling to remember his own on the first day of shooting, just like Ben is now. They had called for a break so he could go over them again, and Kenji felt horrible that he was wasting everyone’s time. To his surprise, the shorter boy approached him and offered to run lines with him. The whole time, Ben didn’t once need to look at the script, seemingly knowing the entirety of it by heart.

The guy must be really nervous if he's messing up something as simple as 'carob juice.'

"Okay, ready to go again." calls the AD.

"Can we take a little break, actually?" Kenji asks, making an exaggerated display of stretching his arms, hoping they catch his drift.

"Yeah, sounds good. Take five, everyone!" The director calls and the crew starts to disperse, some heading straight for crafty.

Ben immediately runs over to his chair, gazing over his heavily annotated sides and muttering to himself. Kenji follows him and puts a hand on the other's shoulder. The action seems to startle poor Ben, though he looks relieved to see it's Kenji.

"Oh! Sorry. Jumpy." Ben says lamely. Kenji just smiles at that.

"I can see that." Without another word, Ben starts poring over his lines again.

Kenji snatches it out of his hands.

"Hey-"

"You don't need it."

“Apparently, I do.” Ben laments, still trying to take back his script. Kenji shakes his head.

“Nope. I know you know the thing by heart. You’re just nervous.” Kenji resists smiling as Ben starts looking more and more annoyed.

“Well, *that’s* an understatement. Now, give me that--”

“Why, though? This isn’t your first time in front of a camera, right?”

“No, but-”

“So what’s up? What’s got you so nervous?”

Ben suddenly stops trying to grab the bundle of papers out of his hands and instead pouts up at him. For whatever reason, Kenji feels his heart skip a beat at the sight.

Still, he feels bad, so he gives the thing back. Ben snatches it away, but he doesn’t stop pouting at him. To his surprise, the shorter teen doesn’t open it again.

“I’m afraid.” Ben says after a moment, the words catching Kenji off guard.

“Afraid?”

“I’ve been doing nothing but bit parts or commercials. This is my first

real role. I just- I don't want to mess up. But it's kind of late for that, huh?" The boy looks so disappointed in himself, and the sight tugs on Kenji's heart strings.

Still, now is not the time for a pity party.

"Wow. You're really hard on yourself, huh?" Kenji tells him, hoping it snaps the other out of it. Ben scoffs at his words.

"I'm serious. This is important."

"No, it isn't. Not so much that you get upset over it. You have to think like that, or else you're going to always be in your head and mess up. Trust me- I know."

Ben doesn't say anything to that, but he no longer looks as frustrated as he did.

"You know, we may be professional actors," the term makes Ben perk up a bit, "but we're still kids. The crew knows that and *we* should remember that. Messing up a line isn't the end of the world."

Ben doesn't smile, but from the subtle shift in his behavior, Kenji can tell the other feels better already. A feeling of pride swells in his chest, knowing he was able to help.

"Thanks. I needed to hear that."

"Anytime. And hey, if it helps, do what I do when I'm nervous."

"Which is...?"

"Pretend the camera isn't there. You should do the lines like how we did the other day- like we're just messing around and running lines in the corner."

"Huh. Okay, I'll try that."

"On in three! Ben, you ready to go?" The AD asks.

"Yeah, there in a sec." Ben heads back and stands on his mark, Kenji following him. The makeup artists touch them up and are out of there in seconds. The rest of the crew is also ready in moments, and the 2nd AC is in front of the camera, clapperboard in hand.

"Scene twelve, take five. Camera 1, mark." the clack of the clapperboard echoes on the quiet set. "Ready. And… action!"

Ben didn't mess up a line for the rest of the day.

-present-

“Cut! Print! Excellent work, guys. Great as always.” The director calls, Ben and the older actor the recipients of his praise.

Some assistant runs up and gives Ben a towel and a water bottle, then scurries off again. Ben downs the thing in one go, and Kenji admits he watched on with rapt attention. The other wipes off some of the sweat and makeup and heads over to where he’s waiting.

“I’m gonna get changed and we can go.”

“Alright. I’ll be in my car. It's the-”

"Let me guess- a blue BMW?" Caught off guard that Ben was able to guess exactly what he has, Kenji just nods in affirmation.

Ben leaves without another word, something he does often nowadays. Kenji isn’t sure if that’s something he does to everyone, or if it’s reserved just for him. He’s not sure he wants to find out.

Kenji ducks his head and goes back outside, making sure no one sees him this time. Once in the car, he puts the roof up, and finally removes the cap, sighing as the air conditioning washes over him. It may be fall now, and the air at night can be nippy, but right now it's noon and in the middle of LA, meaning it’s at least 80 degrees.

About half an hour passes, and Kenji is worried that Ben dipped and left him behind. While he would certainly be disappointed, he wouldn’t blame him- Kenji did visit him at work and sprung it on him suddenly.

When the passenger side door opens and Ben buckles up, Kenji resists

sighing in relief. Instead, he just smiles at the other, who then returns his smile with a hesitant look.

“I had to cancel my scheduled Uber pickup.”

“Ah. Never learned to drive, huh?" Kenji teases.

"I *know* how to drive, jerk. I just don't *always* drive."

"Just yanking your chain. I was wondering what happened to you. Thought you fell in the toilet or something.”

Ben says nothing to that and stares at him nonplussed. Smirking, Kenji pulls out of the lot and drives them down the highway.

“So, where are you taking me?” Ben asks nonchalantly, looking out the window.

“I was thinking… Kirby’s.”

Kenji is wholly watching the road, but he knows without looking that Ben is staring daggers at him right now.

“I don't know how often you go, but it's pretty much the same. I think Eric finally took an interest in the business cuz he's the manager now. You remember him? Of course you do. They renovated it a little, but yeah, otherwise, it’s the same as you remember it. The entrance still does that annoying jingle, though.” Kenji blathers nervously, hoping Ben doesn’t suddenly want to cancel.

The other doesn’t say a word.

They drive for a bit before coming to a red-light. Once he’s stopped, Kenji finally looks Ben’s way. He half expected him to be pouting, like he normally does when he’s displeased. Heck, he even expected him to be angry- or worse, cold and indifferent. He can handle angry, because that means he still cares. Indifferent means he really moved on and thinks of Kenji as nothing more than a co-worker.

The expression on his face isn't one Kenji thought he'd see: A smile. Not a happy, bright smile- one he hopes to see again very soon. No, this smile has a kind of sadness to it, like a rueful look of resignation, with a glazed, distant look in his eyes.

He’s seen the other look like this only *once* before.

Neither of them say another word the whole ride there, and Kenji hopes he isn’t somehow making things *worse* between him and Ben.

Chapter End Notes

When We Were Young by Trevor Hall

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading!

Naming things these places and studios after characters is hard lol

Sorry this came out a little later than I said. Like I thought, a chapter every two days is way too much for me to handle. Still, I'm gonna try and churn this thing out at a quicker pace than the other two big fics I've done.

Ch 3 should be up by Wednesday, 11/9!
EDIT: I keep forgetting how busy this time of year gets for me. Gonna push Ch3 to Friday, 11/11! Sorry for the wait!

Satellite

Chapter Summary

Ben makes up his mind.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Sorry this is so late! Hope you enjoy!

Ben POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ben sits in his recliner, impatiently tapping his fingers against the side of it. He’s currently trying to call someone, the operative word here being ‘trying’, but the person on the other end simply isn’t picking up.

He knows for a *fact* that she isn’t busy right now. She told him she took the week off, so he knows she isn't tied up working. Despite this, he's still sent to voicemail, where the same pre-recorded message he's heard three times now plays again.

“What's with her? Is she screening my calls?” Ben huffs, wondering aloud.

Maybe he should give it a rest. She really might be focused on work, time off or no. He worries that she he might see later and worry that something is wrong. Really, what he wants to talk about isn't all that important and could totally wait until tomorrow.

Still… why isn’t she picking up? Right when he wants to chat with his closest friend?

So, despite expecting to be screened once again, he presses the contact labeled ‘Bumpy’ and waits once more for her to finally pick up.

After the second ring, a groggy voice answers.

“You don't give up, do you?"

"Nope."

"You *do* realize I’m on vacation, right?” She asks sleepily, like he just woke her up. Ben checks his watch.

“Were you asleep? It’s only five in the afternoon.”

“I'll take your word for it. I’m on *vacation.”*

“Oh." Ben isn't the kind of person who sleeps on his days off. Sleeping in, sure, but going to bed early? Not so much. A thought pops into his head. "Wait, are you abroad?” He asks, worried that he called at some ungodly hour while she’s vacationing in the UK or something.

“The term you’re looking for is ‘woman,’ actually.” Ben groans at the Dad-joke.

“Bumps.”

“Ugh… No, I’m not abroad. Or anywhere else, either. I’m lounging in bed, *trying* to enjoy my time off.”

“Ah. So you *are* free.”

“No, I’m on vacation.” She says again, sounding very much like she’s about to hang up on him. The pair call each other often enough, so it’s not like he hasn’t spoken to her in a while. Really, he could have waited for their weekly chat to bend her ear, or even tried again tomorrow, but today was so strange that Ben just had to talk to her about it as soon as possible.

So, in fear that she will hang up and shut off her phone for the night, he just blurts it out.

“I had lunch with Kenji today.”

Only silence comes from Bumpy’s end, then after a moment, the sound of a door shutting and of a lamp being turned on replaces it.

“Talk.”

Hook, line, and sinker.

--

“So when we get there, there’s a short wait, but no seats. I mean, I can stand, but I just came from the set and I was standing all morning.”

“Uhuh.”

“When another party finally got seated, the only thing left in the waiting area was this tiny bench, and we both sat down. And let me tell you, it was tight.”

“No.” Bumpy’s voice sounds scandalized, but Ben can just imagine she said that straight-faced.

“I mean, why does *he* need to sit down? He didn’t work that morning. Anyway, the whole time we waited, his stupidly buff body was pressed against mine.”

“That’s… *one* way to phrase that. But, aren't you taller-”

“And he kept fidgeting the whole time! Oh, and then when we finally get to our table, he orders the same greasy burger he always gets. Watching him eat it was almost like torture.”

“So you were watching him eat?” Bumpy notes. Ben rolls his eyes- not that she can see him.

“You’re not listening-”

“Oh, I’m listening alright, and what you’re telling me is *very enlightening.”* There’s an evenness to her voice that doesn’t sit right with him.

“Oh, and get this,” Ben continues, because he has a lot more to say still. “He was trying to make small talk while he was still eating! Grease from his food was flying everywhere the whole hour and a half

we were there."

"So you guys talked a lot, then?"

"Well, yeah, but-"

"What did you talk about? Did he talk about his 'engagement?'" Ben can practically hear the airquotes the other is probably using.

"Bumps, I swear, you hear every other word."

"I'm hearing the important parts."

"What do you–"

"So after lunch, what, he brought you back to the set?" She interrupts him again. It's just as well. If you let him, Ben can run off on several tangents and lose the original reason he called in the first place.

"Well, no. I finished filming for the day already, so he took me home."

"Oooooh." She sings. Ben cringes at her reaction.

"What??"

"Did you invite him inside?"

“Why would I do that??” Ben asks incredulously.

“Because the guy took you to eat at your favorite restaurant?” She says like it's obvious.

“Former favorite restaurant.”

“And I assumed he paid for it? And then he drove you home in what I assume is a fancy car?”

“Well. I mean- *Yeah.* He *did.* I kind of made him, actually. But why does that mean I should invite him inside?” Bumpy just sighs on the other end.

“Ben, I mean this with love, but dating you must suck.”

“What??” He says again, not following this conversation anymore. “Bumps, what does my story have to do with my dating life? Which is fine, thank you very much.”

The line on the other end is dead quiet and Ben rolls his eyes.

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say a word.”

“My question still stands.” He reminds her.

She sighs again, though a lot louder.

“Ben, I think you forgot that I’m the only other person who knows *what* happened between you and Kenji. The reason you called four times was because I’m the only one you can be 100% honest with about all this.”

Ben gulps, hoping she wasn’t going to bring up that little detail. They always vent to one another, and though it’s been years since he even brought up the other man, she has been the only one he can talk to about him.

“So let's analyze what you’ve told me so far.” She continues. “He snuck onto a hot set to invite you to lunch at your ‘former’ favorite restaurant, chatted with you for a while, paid for the meal, then drove you home.”

“Yes…”

“I don’t know about you, but that sounds **like a date.”**

“A date? What, grabbing lunch? And you said it yourself- He's getting married. Pshh.”

“Oh, you can't trust what those gossip rags say. So, I ask again- what did you guys talk about?” Ben takes a moment to compose himself, her previous comment catching him off guard.

“Just about what we’ve been up to. Roles, new hobbies, how the camp fam has been. Normal stuff.”

“And at any point, did he act like he has the past few years? Rude, dismissive?"

“...No.” He admits.

"Did you have to use sanitizer around him?"

"No. You know I don't carry the stuff around anymore. I didn't even feel the itch the whole time."

"Good. And finally, despite your whining, did you have a good time?" He rolls his eyes at her slight dig at him.

"Yeah." He admits, begrudgingly.

“Okay. Sounds like a great date.”

“It *wasn’t* a date.” Ben insists.

“Did you *want* it to be?”

“No.” He says, maybe a little too quickly. He internally groans, knowing she’s going to take that as some sort of psychological tell that he meant ‘yes’ or something.

Another beat of silence passes between them, and Ben is lowkey losing his mind. How did him venting about his day turn into *this* line of questioning from his best friend? Why is she so caught up on how much like a date his not-date went?

And why isn't he angrier that she would make such an accusation? Maybe he was better off when she wasn't answering the phone.

"Ben," Bumpy starts, cutting the silence. "The fact he reached out at all, the fact he went through the trouble to do all this today- it has to mean something. I'm just teasing about the 'date' thing, but from what you've told me, it certainly sounds like he's trying to be more civil. He may even want to be friends again."

He doesn't respond to that.

"And you *agreeing* to go to that lunch says *a lot more* than him inviting you, don't you think?"

Ben simply sighs, because, though he'll never admit it, she's right. Though, what it says about him, he hasn't the faintest idea.

Then he flinches, remembering the final part of his story. From the way the conversation is going, he's not sure about sharing it with her, but he and Kenji did have a *brief* conversation after they arrived at Ben's house.

'Ben… Before you go, I just want to tell you something.' The shorter man tells him as he's getting out of his car.

‘...what?’

‘I really enjoyed today. I’m glad you came with me.’

‘I’m always down for free food.’

Kenji laughs at that. Soon enough, his face and voice softens in that way it does around Ben. The sight both makes his chest tighten and stomach flip.

‘I know it must be hard to see me again after all this time, but I… I’ve missed you.’ Ben scowls slightly.

‘You have a funny way of showing it.’

‘I would have reached out before this, but… well, how could I? When we see each other, we're not exactly friendly.'

'It's been mutual, hasn't it?'

'Sometimes, it feels like you cancel appearances at events I show up at. You're been avoiding me.'

‘Gee, I wonder why I did that?’

Kenji looks away, sighing.

‘I know. But… if you do the film, we can look at it as a fresh start. All of us. I know the others would love it if we could hang out like we used to.’

He stands there, just looking at his shoes, thinking.

‘…I'd like that too.’ Ben admits after a moment.

‘Really? Great! I’m so glad to hear that. Oh! But, um, but I don’t want to pressure you into agreeing or anything.” Kenji stutters. “Just- even if you end up not doing the film, I still hope we can hang out more.’

Ben is surprised by the confession, though he makes sure not to show it on his face. Kenji knows him too well, however, and assumes his silence is a good sign.

‘Just think about it, yeah?’ He says with a smile.

‘See ya, Kenji.’

‘Bye, Ben.’

Unconvincingly, he speaks up, hoping his momentary silence doesn't give Bumpy any funny ideas.

“Yeah, right.” He replies. “You know I won't say no to free food. And

besides, he probably only invited me to butter me up so I agree to do that movie."

"Ah… The reunion. So ambitious of Claire and the studio for trying it."

"I always forget you're friends with her."

"So, *are* you going to do the film?"

"I told you- I don't know. There's a lot to consider. 'Survival' isn't done yet, I've got a whole season of 'Solar Opposites' to record voice lines for--"

"Okay, well, easier question then: Do you *want* to do it?"

Bumpy is always so direct in her questions. It's one of Ben's favorite things about her- she doesn't beat around the bush and charges head on. Sometimes it's a bit much, but just like with Mae, he knows to trust what she says.

And, the answer is 'Yes.' With every fiber of his being, he wants to do the film. It's a good plot (one he relates to on a personal level), the characters are interesting and real, and a major studio is backing it. It has all the trademarks of a success, and even in the unlikely event it flops, he's been waiting for years for this kind of role to come along.

Also, the idea of seeing everyone more often, *even Kenji,* doesn't sound horrible either.

“Yeah, I do.” He admits.

“Then *do* it.” She tells him simply.

The pair chat for a little while more, Bumpy telling him all about her new manuscript and general catching up, but soon enough, they say goodnight.

Ben didn’t move from his living room until well after Firecracker left for the day. In fact, he doesn't leave at all- He ended up falling asleep right there in his easy chair as Bumpy’s (and Kenji’s) words float around his mind.

--

The default iPhone ringtone startles Ben awake. He almost flings the thing across the living room, and then all at once is confronted with the fact that he fell asleep in his easy chair.

“Ugh, my neck.” This isn’t the first time he’s slept in this chair, unfortunately. He forgot that, as comfortable as sitting in this chair while he’s awake is, sleeping in it is just asking for trouble in the morning.

Ben grabs the phone and groans at seeing the caller ID. He answers it anyway.

“I don’t have anything today. Why are you calling so early?”

Ben is only guessing that it's earlier than normal. The blinds are closed and thus too dark to see his analog wall clock. He's too lazy (and sleep deprived) to simply check on his phone, so for all he knows, it's actually a perfectly normal time to be calling someone.

Knowing Mae, who happens to be the one calling, it probably isn't.

"I'm sending you a video link." She tells him, not even a greeting, her tone slow and deliberate.

"A link?" The second he says that, his phone vibrates, and he sees he indeed has a text from Mae that looks like a link. "What is it?"

"It's better if you see for yourself. Make sure to watch *all* of it, okay?" She immediately hangs up, not letting Ben get a word in edgewise.

Ben, groggy and confused, stares at the now blank phone screen.

He taps it again, and sees that it's almost eight in the morning. A bit early for a day off, but not a strange time to be cryptically calling someone. It's also perfectly early enough that he wouldn't be blamed for simply slinking off to bed and getting another hour or two of sleep.

Instead of doing that or what Mae demanded asked, he pockets the phone, and heads to the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, he's dressed and ready for the day. Though, he has no plans and no work that needs doing at the moment- aside from getting the paperwork done for 'In The Stars' that sits on his desk. Though, doing that would mean committing to the project and Ben is still on the fence.

He heads to the kitchen to start some coffee and breakfast for himself. It’s a chore for Ben to cook and he’s not particularly good at it anyway- another reason for him to keep FC around. He always rues her days off. He'd lament how soft he's gotten, needing someone around to help do basic chores, but that would involve effort- and he can't be bothered right now. Really not up for anything elaborate, he grabs some berries from the crisper and skips the coffee in lieu of bottled water.

Yeah, he can’t even be bothered to make a pot of coffee.

He migrates to his back porch, loving how crisp and bracing the morning air is. Call him cliche, but the moment he steps outside, he takes a big inhale and sighs in content. The berry bushes are still watered from the other day and the grass isn't all that long, so he doesn't even need to do yard work. He rarely gets any use out of his yard, so he takes this opportunity to lounge around back here.

Before his days on CC, Ben was the homebody-est of homebodies, never seeing the point of adventure or the outdoors in general. After the show finished, he wanted to expand his horizons, so to speak. The first project he worked on afterwards was about a group of people hunting for a lost treasure in the jungle. He spent weeks in the Amazon to film it, and he’s found that lifestyle agreeable. Nowadays, he’s busy with all sorts of projects that keep him more or less in cities and studios, though he can typically work in a hike or two a month.

Really, he’d love to go back to Brazil one day, if time allowed it.

A notification bell rings from his phone. It’s a text from Mae.

Mae: Are you watching it?

Ben huffs as he pops a few berries in his mouth before replying.

Ben: Gonna watch it right now.

Mae: Remember, watch the whole thing

Knowing she won't stop bothering him until he does, he scrolls up in the conversation and clicks the link she sent earlier. It opens his YouTube app and pulls up a video.

He quirks a brow at the title.

'EXCLUSIVE: Kenji Kon Tells All!'

To Ben's credit, his chest only slightly ached at seeing the name. Maybe it was the fact that he saw the guy twice in as many days, but had this been a few weeks ago, he'd have probably dropped the phone and fired Mae afterwards for even sending the video to him.

When he checks out the channel, he's surprised to find it isn't any of the big names in celebrity news, but a regular content creator. Gray

Mitchell. Zach Mitchell's brother, if Ben is correct. Zach is an actor he has yet to work with, but is someone everyone knows of since he's practically in everything nowadays. His brother, Gray, was a child actor like Ben, but instead of pursuing that career, he focused more on making a name for himself on the internet.

The video in question was posted about an hour ago, and much to Ben's surprise, it has over a million views already.

Wow. What did he say in the interview that it's trending? Or is Ben so out of the loop about Kenji that he doesn't realize everything he does trends? Though, why go through a smaller news outlet to announce something? As far as Ben knows, Kenji and Gray, or Kenji and Zach for that matter, aren't that close. Then again, he could be wrong about that. It's not like Ben kept up with everything the taller man is up to...

Regardless, his curiosity is thoroughly peaked.

Ben sits himself down on his lawn under the shade of a one of his small palm trees, downs the rest of the berries, and presses play.

The video opens with a well-produced intro, and then the vaguely familiar face of Gray Mitchell is on screen. He introduces himself, his channel, and then introduces his guest for the day- Kenji. The camera switches to him, and he's sitting in a chair across from Gray, the room dressed like a typical sitdown interview. Kenji waves amicably at the camera, and then Gray starts talking again.

"So, wow. I think you're the most famous person I've ever had on here- And I've had my brother on here before."

"Aw, thanks." Kenji comically tries to slip him a fifty dollar bill and Gray just laughs.

“It’s funny, though. We were both in the ‘Jurassic’ franchise, but I don’t think we’ve actually met before this, huh?”

Oh, yeah. Ben forgot that one of Gray’s biggest roles was the original Jurassic World movie that their series is a spinoff of. They only had a couple of crossover moments, but none with Gray’s character.

“No, and it’s a shame. It might have been cool if you showed up on our show. Or heck, have us in one of the movies.” The pair laugh. “But I gotta say, I’m a big fan of yours. I rewatch those ‘Insidious’ movies you did when you were younger all the time.”

“Oh, thanks man. I don’t know if you heard, but another one is in the works, and they’re thinking about having my character return, all grown up.”

“No shot? I’ll be sure to check it out.”

“Anyway, we’re not here to talk about me.” Gray tries to segue.

“Oh, but it's so *fun* talking about you, buddy.” Kenji gushes, earning him another laugh from Gray.

Ben watches with an air of nostalgia, remembering all the times Kenji made him and the others laugh during press junkets for CC back in the day. Even before 'the incident' Ben never really cared for the media attention, but Kenji always seemed to make that bearable. That said, nothing so far stands out to him as ‘I better call Ben and have him watch this’ just yet.

The interview is as standard as they get- Gray asking Kenji questions about his career and future projects, then the actor answering him, with a witty jab or joke thrown in to keep it entertaining. Most of what is being said are things he already knew. Kenji even alludes to the CC reunion, but says nothing more beyond 'working on something with some cool people and I can't wait for you guys to find out who.'

After ten minutes of this, Ben almost shuts it off to call Mae and talk her ear off about making a big deal out of nothing.

'Make sure to watch all of it, okay?'

Despite not seeing the point of all this, Ben turns up the volume and waits for whatever it is he's supposed to.

"Now, I hate to be that guy, but there's something I'm dying to ask, and I think my viewers want to know as well."

"Is it about a certain pink-haired actress?" Kenji guesses, smiling. Gray grimaces sheepishly.

"Sorry. But, lately she's been spotted wearing a shiny new ring. That, coupled with the fact movers were seen coming and going from your shared penthouse, seems to suggest something is going on. A popular theory is that you two are engaged and are moving in somewhere else. Care to set the record straight?"

Kenji just smiles a bit ruefully, looking away from both Gray and the camera.

Much like he did a few days ago when he first heard the rumor about

all this, Ben watches with undivided attention. The answer shouldn't matter, since Kenji's personal life is of no consequence to him, but there's a part of him that won't be satisfied until he hears what the taller man has to say.

The implication of such an interest remains ignored by Ben.

After a moment, Kenji looks up, and with that same sad smile, he answers.

"I-um. I'm moving out on my own. That ring she's wearing is something she bought herself. And... we broke up, actually." Kenji replies simply. Gray looks at him in shock. Though, he doesn't say anything to that, only nodding at the answer. Kenji keeps going. "We're still friends, and we still talk, but we just... grew apart and we both decided it was best to move on."

"Wow. I have to say, I wasn't expecting to hear that. I'm sorry. I think I speak for everyone when I say you two were a sweet couple."

"Thanks."

Ben exhales, releasing the breath he didn't realize he was holding. He would never have guessed they broke up. Hearing that, though, he figured they were on good terms at least. Brooklynn and Kenji *would* need to be okay if they are going to be in a movie together soon, after all. As interesting as this is, this can't be why Mae told him to watch this. Yes, she knows he avoids Kenji if at all possible, but why would she think him going through a breakup would be interesting to him? She can't *possibly* know what happened between them.

Ben checks the time remaining and sees there's only four minutes left.

‘Make sure to watch all of it, okay?’ his mind helpfully reminds him once again.

After another few questions about the breakup, which Ben notes were all in good taste, Kenji interrupts Gray.

“Since I, um, seem to be spilling my guts here today, there's a couple more things I'd like to put out there. If that's okay?”

“Oh!, Sure, go for it.” Gray assures him.

“Thanks. Well, I… I have a secret. Brooklynn knew about it, of course, and she’s been wonderful about keeping it and accepting me for it. I won't lie, but it played a part of why we broke up. Still, it's something I've wanted to share.”

Ben furrows his brows.

What secret? What the heck was he hiding from everyone?

“After your earlier bombshell, I can't imagine what it could be. But, by all means, I'm more than happy to hear what you have to share.”

Kenji just smiles. He takes a moment to clear his throat, and then looks Gray dead in the eye.

“I’m Bisexual.”

What.

WHAT.

He… he came out…?

He actually–

“Ah. First of all, thank you for trusting me to share that with. Though, I think I understand why you approached me to do this interview first.” Gray says thoughtfully. “My brother was in a similar situation a few years ago.”

“Well, I knew at least with *you,* I wouldn’t be asked a million inappropriate questions.”

“Right. A lot of people think coming out isn’t a big deal anymore, but it can be a traumatizing experience. Not to shade anyone in particular, but some reporters don’t have tact when dealing with something like this.”

“Oh, some of them don’t have tact, *period.”* Kenji jokes.

Ben isn't paying attention anymore. He sort of feels like he's hallucinating, not willing to believe what just happened *really*

happened.

Kenji just came out of the closet.

Ben doesn't know why, but his mind wanders to the first time *he* came out to someone.

That someone, coincidentally, was Kenji.

-7 Years Ago-

Camp Cretaceous season one has almost wrapped filming. The episodes that have already aired have been well received so far, but there is still no news if there will be a second season.

Today happens to be Ben's final day for filming. And, because of the lack of news about a second season, it may very well be his final time on this set as 'Sean.' Needless to say, Ben was emotional by the end of it.

The crew applaud him as he takes a bow, a few tears gathered in the corner of his eyes. One of the stagehands, a tall, younger woman everyone calls 'Bumpy' for some reason, hands him a tissue. He takes

it gratefully and leaves the set, unsure if he will return. The melancholy he was feeling all day overwhelms him, and he finds a dark corner away from everyone to cry in. It’s a good thing his mom is busy making calls right now, otherwise she'd fret over his reaction.

His mood certainly isn’t helped by the fact that the final scene he filmed today was his character ‘dying.’ As exciting as it was to film, it's still a little traumatizing, you know?

The writers and producers only told him Sean’s grisly fate halfway through production. After that meeting, the showrunner, Scott, pulled him aside and told him his character is actually alive and will rejoin everyone in the middle of season 2- assuming that they get one, of course.

Ben prays the show gets renewed.

He'd hate for this to be the last time he sees everyone.

“Ben? What are you doing over here?”

The familiar voice of Kenji makes Ben look up. The taller teen has already changed out of costume and looks about ready to head out himself.

“Nothing.” Ben lies, looking away. He hopes the other doesn’t notice his tears.

“Are you hungry?” The taller teen asks abruptly.

“Huh?”

“I was gonna eat at home, but there’s a nearby diner I really want to go to. You in?”

“Oh. Uh, my mom-”

“Just ask. She can eat with us. Food is always better with company.”

Ben, despite his confusion and earlier dismay, smiles at the sentiment.

“What about *your* dad? You can’t leave set without-”

“I came with my dad’s bodyguard, Hawks, today. He does what I tell him. Now, it’s a simple question, Seanny.” Kenji teases. The nickname is something Ryan calls Sean when he wants to annoy him- though right now, it’s having an opposite effect on Ben. “Do you want to come eat or not?”

Ben’s stomach growls, answering his question for him.

The sound makes Kenji burst out in laughter. Ben won’t admit it, but he loves seeing Kenji laugh- the other only seems to let loose when he’s around him and the others, so anytime he can show genuine emotion like this feels like a special thing to witness.

“Guess I'm hungry too." Ben replies after the other calms down. "I’ll go find my mom. What’s the name of the restaurant?”

“Kirby’s.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Well, you’re gonna love it.”

-

Ben *did* end up loving it. Though, watching Kenji devour his bacon-burger was like watching a train-wreck in slow motion. Still, the other eats with such gusto, it’s hard to not smile at the sight.

At the restaurant, Ben and Kenji were able to get a booth to themselves, his mom and Kenji’s bodyguard sharing another one next to them. At first, Ben thought that would be awkward, but he forgot what a sociable person she is. From what he can overhear from their conversation, they’re getting along famously. He and Kenji talk the whole time. Despite not liking the idea of Kenji spewing burger bits at him, talking to the other is always interesting, so the chatted the whole time. He has a certain… unique way of seeing things, and if nothing else, he’s always fun to be around.

"I already got my learner's permit, buying a car is the next step. Right?"

"Uh... sure, but if your dad already has a car, and you can't drive it alone until you get your license anyway, waiting isn't a bad idea." Ben points out.

"Ugh, I know. I just saw my dream car pass by the other day and I practically begged my dad to let me get one."

"Oh? What car is that?"

"A blue BMW, with a sunroof and everything."

"Why that car specifically...?"

“I dunno. It's cool? Doesn't matter. He won't let me buy one. Just saying, but it’s dumb that our parents get our money for the hard work *we* do.”

“They don't 'get' our money, just manage it. It’s to make sure we don’t blow it on dumb things.” Ben points out. "Like cars we can't even drive yet."

“I guess." Kenji pouts. "I just think if I earn it, I should have access to it."

“Well, it's just until we're 18 anyway. After that, it's free for us to use."

"...if there's anything left..." Kenji says under his breath. He said it so soft, Ben wasn't sure he heard him right. As it is, he doesn't comment on it.

“Can’t wait, honestly." Ben speaks up, moving the conversation. "Not just for the money- just, being an *adult* in general.”

“Tell me about it." Kenji agrees. "Free to make my own choices and do what I want? That's the life."

"Personally, I just hate the idea that my mom has to wait with me on set the whole day.”

“That’s why my dad gets me bodyguards. He did the whole ‘guardian’ thing for one day when I did ‘Big Hero 6’ and never did it again.”

“Hmm. At least he can go back to work that way. My mom… she gave up a lot to be with me out here. I know she misses Chicago a lot. I do too, honestly.”

“Is that why you were crying earlier? You were homesick?” Kenji asks suddenly.

Oh god, he brought it up. Honestly, Ben was hoping he didn't actually see him in such a state.

“No… It’s my last day for filming, you know? And… Sean died.”

Ben knows he didn’t, but that’s a secret between him and Scott for the time being. Or, maybe forever if things remain the way they are.

“Yeah… I can’t believe they did that. I film my final scenes tomorrow, and from the script, Ryan seems particularly messed up by it.”

“Well, they may have had a rough start, but the two of them were really getting along by the end.”

“Just like us.” Kenji replies, a smile on his face. Ben’s heart skips a beat at the sight, the adorable implication not lost on him.

“We didn’t have a rough start. I think we got along pretty quickly.” Ben mumbles, shying away a bit in embarrassment. He can hear Kenji softly chuckle at that.

“All six of us did, thankfully.” Kenji adds on. “I don’t know if the show would have made it to the end of the season if our chemistry didn’t translate well on screen, you know?”

“Aw, you think we have chemistry?" Ben teases.

"Yeah, yeah. Yuck it up. But it's true." Kenji playfully rolls his eyes. “Gotta say though, I think you, me and Darius get along the best.”

“The girls would have something to say to that, I think.” Ben laughs. “But yeah, I knew being on a show with other people my age would be fun, but I didn't think I’d make such good friends.”

Ben truly means that. He’s sure that even years from now and they’ve all moved on from CC, they’ll still remain friends. That's something he's wanted forever- a group of people that he can consistently rely on and be there for. Maybe that's a weird thing to want as a teenager, or maybe, that's exactly what a teenager would want. Regardless, he has five friends now.

And friends tell each other *secrets,* right? Well, there's one that Ben's

been dying to share, and he feels comfortable and safe enough with Kenji to tell him first. And for no other reason beyond that.

“Hey, um, Kenji?”

“Hmm?” The other has a fry sticking out of his mouth. Ben laughs softly at the sight.

“There's something I wanna tell you, but you gotta promise not to tell anyone else. Okay?”

“Sure, man. What’s up?”

Ben hasn’t told anyone this before. He has a feeling he could tell his mom and everything would be fine, but there’s something indescribably more terrifying about telling a parent versus telling a friend. He could probably tell the others as well, but for some reason, he really wants Kenji to be the first to know.

And, depending on how this goes, Kenji may be the last to know, actually.

Yeah, no, this is just as terrifying.

“Ben?”

Well, here we go.

“Um, I didn’t know who to tell first, but I feel like I can trust you.”

“Uh, thanks, but you’re making me nervous. You’re not, like, sick are you?” Kenji asks hesitantly, his voice concerned.

“No, no. Nothing like that.”

“Oh, good. Then, what is it?”

Ben lowers his voice and leans in a bit closer. Kenji meets him halfway, offering an ear, picking up on what Ben wanted him to do.

“I’m gay.”

Kenji immediately reels and pulls away. At first Ben feels his heart sink, but as he looks at the other’s face, he sees his reaction is more in surprise than anything, not getting a hint of disgust or anger from the taller teen. Honestly, it's a relief, but there's still the matter of what the other says next.

“You’re– I mean, you're sure?”

“I knew since I was eight."

"Huh. I mean, I knew you were kind of delicate, no offence, but I guess... Huh." Kenji muses aloud.

"Look, I’m not sure I want to *tell* people in general, you know? I think I'll tell the others someday, but maybe not come out in public. I just don’t want me, or my career, to be defined by it.”

“Huh. I get it.” Kenji replies, a little breathless. His face is still the same, wide-eyed look as when Ben first said those words. “I, um… you said I’m the first one you told?”

Ben nods.

“Wow. Thanks, man. I'm honored.” The taller teen sits up proudly as he says this.

Ben doesn’t know why, but he just starts laughing at the totally *Kenji* way of reacting to such a confession. Still a bit out of it, Kenji joins in half-heartedly.

“I needed that laugh. Thank you.” Ben gets out.

“I think I did too. I just– Huh. So, you're... Huh.” The taller teen mumbles.

Ben isn’t sure he likes how long Kenji seems to be taking to snap out of it.

“Are- Are you okay with it? I mean, I understand if you would want me to keep away from you or–”

“Dude, what? Of course I’m okay with it. You’re still the same little Seanny, right?” Kenji jokes, smiling at him.

“Call me ‘little’ again and see what happens.” Ben jokingly threatens, relieved at the other’s answer. “And… thanks.”

“Nothing to thank me for. It’s not a big deal.”

“Just– thanks, anyway.” Ben responds shyly, looking at anywhere but Kenji.

“You’re actually really **cute,** you know that?” Kenji says out of nowhere.

WHAT.

“W-what??”

“Sometimes you get real shy, just like Sean does. I just noticed.”

“Uh, thanks?” Ben stutters, unsure what the heck this conversation is.

"You know, when you're not panicking over everything."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm just teasing. Oh, that reminds me! You know that part where Ryan and Paul get lost? Well, when we film tomorrow, I think-"

After that, Kenji kept talking about whatever came to mind, and they moved on from that whole... whatever that was.

But all Ben could think about was that offhanded comment by Kenji, and if there was anything more behind those words.

-Present-

The voice of Gray snaps Ben out of whatever stupor he was in, and suddenly, he's 22 again, sitting on his lawn with lukewarm water in hand.

“Earlier you mentioned you had a couple of things to share. Coming out was one, so what's the other?”

“It's more like a message to a specific person. If that's okay, of course.”

“Oh? Well, this interview just keeps getting more and more interesting. Go for it.”

Kenji turns towards the camera, and Ben feels like the taller man is looking at him directly.

“Hey, Seanny.”

Ben damn near crushes the bottle he's holding from the sheer shock of being called that again. He's certain he didn't mishear the other. Kenji, for whatever reason, is specifically talking to *him* right now. Ben hunches over his phone and watches his screen intently.

“I know this may seem cowardly, and it probably is, but I… really wanted to *apologize.* For all of it. I know what you’re thinking- ‘oh, he can’t do it in person, he won’t even say what he’s apologizing for’ and you'd be right. I'm kind of scared to talk about it. But since I’m laying it all out there, now seemed to be a good time to just… say it. I’m sorry. For everything.”

Ben has a flurry of different emotions going through him right now-

Anger, like Kenji predicted. He couldn’t do this in person? He owes Ben that, surely. Granted, Ben might not have given him the time of day if he tried, but still.

Relief, that the other is at least sorry about what happened. Though he won't say what it is he's sorry for, Ben doesn't need to be reminded.

Pain, since he *is* once again reminded of what Kenji is even apologizing for.

But the most surprising emotion to come from it, the one Ben latches on to, is **excitement.**

Why he feels that, however, he doesn't know. Regardless, he has to once again remind himself to breathe.

The interview seems more or less finished after that, with only twenty seconds left, so Ben doesn't feel remiss in turning it off.

He sits there, much like he did the night before and a couple of days ago, and lets himself just feel whatever it is he's feeling. The issue is there's such a hodgepodge of emotions stirring within him, it's almost overwhelming.

After a few moments of this, he grabs his phone and dials the last number that called him earlier. The person on the other end picks up immediately.

"You watched it?"

"How did you even know this video was up?" He counters.

"Bumpy sent it to me. You know how she is- always keeping up with everyone from back then."

"Of *course* she sent it." Ben comments offhandedly.

"So?"

"...What do you mean?"

“I mean, so what do you think? I know I'm not the only one who calls you Sean, Ben. You didn't sign the papers at the meeting because of him, but it sounds like he really wants to make it work." She supplies. "The deadline to file all the paperwork is soon, and they’re going to start filming in a couple of months. If you’re going to give them an answer, it should be today.”

The moment the video ended, he knew that was why she sent it to him in the first place. Since Kenji apologized, maybe things could be okay between them and Ben can join ‘In The Stars.’ What she doesn’t know, however, is he was already seriously considering it before he watched it.

Now, despite a big part of him telling him he's making a mistake, he’s all but certain of his answer.

“I’ll do it. Meet me at the studio and we can both sign them there.”

The sigh of relief from Mae does little to settle Ben’s heart. Afterall, he may have just agreed to do something that could further drive him away from the others, or may even mess him up more than what happened years ago. Or, it could be exactly what he’s hoping it is, and it’s the role of a lifetime.

Either way, he’s both terrified and excited to find out which it will be.

Chapter End Notes

Satellite by Harry Styles

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading!

The car Kenji wanted/now owns

I know we're three chapters in and they aren't even working on the movie yet lol But now that Ben is all signed up, that part can begin :)))

I'm going to aim for Saturday, 11/19 for the next update. I want to finish working on the chapter art for the first three chapters, plus I need to catch up on my chapter art for Lingering Stare S5. See y'all then!

EDIT: I was able to do a lot of the art I needed to, but ch4 is going to have to be pushed to Thurs, 11/24 for me to get *everything* done. Thanks for your patience!

Sanctuary

Chapter Summary

Ben and Kenji need to reconnect.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Sorry this took long! I hope you enjoy!
May 2024 Edit: Edited to include that Kenji is into rock climbing (via Jurassic World Chaos Theory)

Kenji POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The clattering of pans and an exasperated voice echoes in the large kitchen of a penthouse apartment, prompting the door to the dining room to immediately open. A curious head of colorful hair pokes in to see what's going on.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t need any help in here?” Brooklynn asks Kenji, who is currently worrying over the now dented pans he dropped.

“It’s all good. Don’t worry, B.”

“Well, *I’m* worried.” Another voice chimes in sarcastically. “I came here to have dinner and so far, nothing is being cooked.”

“Shut it, Yaz. And don’t act like you’re not munching on my dinner rolls.”

The stuntwoman nudges Brooklynn’s side and the two laugh to

themselves softly. Kenji ignores them and picks out his ‘good pan’ which, unfortunately, is the most dinged up of the bunch. He gets the pan warmed up and groans to himself when he realizes he didn’t take the meat out of the freezer.

“Not to be a downer,” drawls another voice, “But those dinner rolls are already cold.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Sammy.” Kenji grits out. He brings the frozen meat to the sink and lets hot water run over it.

“Dude, I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to put wine on ice, not just leave it out.” Another male voice says in concern, the man attached to it holding the bottle of wine in question.

“Your input is appreciated, Darius.” Kenji turns to his gaggle of friends, all of them now standing in his kitchen- some watch on in concern, while some look very unimpressed.

Kenji didn’t think it was going to be like this.

The whole reason he invited them here was so they could catch up before the table read. And since this gathering also served as a sort of housewarming for his new place, he figured he'd cook them dinner. It's just that by the time all of them arrived, he only made dinner rolls and nothing else. He's never really had to cook before, let alone host a gathering, so he's not sure what made him think he could pull it off...

It also doesn’t help that one of his guests, the one he wants to see the most, is currently *not* here yet and that has him a bit on edge.

Kenji hangs his head in defeat, knowing what he has to do to avoid a disaster.

“Actually, can you guys help me? I think I bit off more than I can chew.”

“Well, at least *one* of us did.” Yaz deadpans, earning her a few chuckles.

Everyone immediately gets to work helping him get dinner ready. He tells them the menu and most of them know what needs to be done. Darius and Brooklynn work on the veggies, Yaz preps the meat, Sammy gets to work on more rolls, while Kenji makes mashed potatoes.

In no time at all, they’re bringing out Beef Bourguignon, with mash instead of baked potatoes, and some fresh rolls and chilled wine as well.

The second Kenji opens the dining room door, so too opens the elevator door that resides in the apartment.

Kenji immediately perks up.

“Your security isn't all that great. He just let me- Oh. Was I supposed to come early to help?” the familiar voice of Ben chimes as he wanders into the room, a strange looking potted plant in hand.

“Ben!” Kenji exclaims excitedly, and hurriedly puts his mash on the table. He makes his way over to Ben man, barely dodging Horatio (his golden rhino head) on the way, and takes the… bush(?) the taller man

is holding and ushers him inside. “I told security to watch out for you. I’m assuming this is a housewarming present?”

“Yeah, it’s a currant plant. It’ll grow fruit during the summer.”

“And you have this because…?”

“Oh. I grow them. I have several bushes in my yard and harvest the fruit every year. I had a new start growing, so I thought that would make a nice present.”

“Huh.” is all Kenji says. He didn’t know Ben had any kind of green thumb. The taller man frowns at his response.

“If you don’t like it, I can take it back.” he reaches for the plant, and Kenji turns away to shield it from the other.

“Nope. It’s mine now. Besides, I love the present. Thank you, Seanny.”

The second the nickname is uttered, Kenji almost shrinks in on himself in regret.

To his surprise, however, Ben doesn’t look upset. In fact, his cheeks seem to redden a little at Kenji’s words. Before he can ask about it, the rest of the fam make themselves known.

“Move, dingus, you saw him already.” Yaz gently pushes him away and hugs Ben. “It’s been too long, buddy! How’ve you been?”

The others also crowd around Ben and take turns greeting him, slowly pushing Kenji further away from the shorter man. Despite being treated like this in his own home, the sight of everyone finally together again brings a smile to his face.

It's been years since the six of them were all together. He meets up with the other four rather frequently, but all together, and now with Ben included? Not since the show ended, that's for sure.

After finding a home for his new plant on his balcony, Kenji joins everyone at the table, the others having started digging in. He'd be a little more offended that they didn't wait for him if he didn't have to rely on them to get dinner finished in the first place.

He takes his seat next to Ben, a serendipitous coincidence.

"The food looks great you guys." Ben smiles.

"It *tastes* great too." drawls Sammy around a mouthful of stew.

The spend the dinner catching up, sharing what they've been up to and telling funny and interesting stories about things that happened during their time apart. It's mostly between everyone and Ben, though- Kenji has heard most of these stories before.

A part of him feels guilty that he was probably the cause of them not being together like this in so long.

"So when I lept off of the railing, I realized mid-air that the wire

wasn't tight enough!" Yaz exclaims.

"No." Ben gasps.

"Luckily, I made the jump anyway, but that could have been bad. Almost fired one of my best guys for not properly securing everything."

"You *didn't* fire him?" Brooklynn asks.

"Well, he was going through some stuff at home, which is why he made the mistake. I didn't wanna add onto his troubles, so I just gave him paid time off for the rest of the shoot."

"You're such a good person, sweetie." Sammy coos, nudging Yaz in the shoulder. The stuntwoman nudges her back and the pair giggle to themselves.

Kenji feels someone nudging him too. He looks looks to his left and finds Ben trying to whisper something to him.

"Are those two…?"

"Bro, don't get me started. We straight up asked them at one point and they said that we got it wrong. But they do stuff like go on vacations alone together, hold hands in pictures, and I'm pretty sure Yaz has a house in Texas that she uses a good chunk of the year."

Ben backs away, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“I mean, I guess best friends do that.” Kenji gives him a look, which is returned with an eyeroll. “If they say it isn’t anything, then it isn’t anything.”

“Hmm. I just hope that if it *is* something, they’ll tell us one day.”

Ben goes silent at that, and goes back to eating, a distant look in his eyes. Kenji, only now realizing what he just said (and to who he said it to), goes back to picking at his plate and hopes he doesn't put his foot in his mouth again.

“So, I hear both congratulations and condolences are in order.” Yaz speaks up, addressing Kenji.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“We heard you two officially broke up.” Sammy provides. “We were heartbroken, but it was nice to hear you two were okay afterwards.”

He and Brooklynn share the subtlest of glances, neither of them holding their gaze long.

“Well, like I said in the interview, we knew it was coming for a while now. And it’s not like we’re going to stop being friends, y'know?” Kenji explains.

Kenji pointedly ignores the steely gaze of the person next to him.

“It’s also kind of nice having the whole penthouse to myself.” Brooklynn chimes in. "Now that the noisy roommate is gone."

“Excuse you, I’m a delight to live with.” Kenji cries defiantly.

“Sure, Kenj. Oh, just so you know, I've already converted your old room into a home gym.”

“Wow. You know what? I take it back. Bitter exes.” Kenji deadpans, earning him a few laughs.

Once again, he ignores the look Ben is surely giving him.

“Anyway, congrats on coming out, too.” Yaz says.

Oh. Right. He did that.

It’s not that Kenji forgot he did, but it’s just that his life has been largely unaffected by it since. He may have had a few offers for more magazine covers and his agent has mentioned a few interviews on the table, but so far, nothing remotely life changing has happened. Still, he's glad to have done it.

“Thanks.” he tells her.

“I’m a little hurt that you didn’t tell us beforehand, but I get it.” Darius muses. “I’m just glad you can be yourself openly now.”

“Well, I’m still the same guy. I’m so busy, I’m not going to have time to be dating, anyway.” Kenji jokes.

“You had time to date *Brooklynn* for six years.” Ben suddenly says, not even looking up from his plate. Everyone goes silent at the comment.

Um... was this dinner a bad idea? Kenji absolutely deserved that dig, but with that one comment, Ben has put a damper on the mood. And, since Kenji has resolved himself not to default back to the snarky version of himself he's become so accustomed to being around Ben, he just smiles awkwardly and ignores the comment.

“Oh yeah, I haven’t told you guys what happened when I was in Brussels.” Brooklynn pipes up, piquing everyone's interests, and dives right into her story.

Kenji doesn’t talk for the rest of dinner.

After dessert, and another round of wine, they call it a night. Brooklynn gets a rideshare for the girls back to her place for ‘more bonding’ while Darius and Ben crash at Kenji’s for the evening.

Kenji and Ben had to carry Darius to a bed, the younger man not used to alcohol just yet. One issue Kenji has with his current apartment is there’s only one guestroom, meaning anyone else wishing to stay the night will have to bum on the couch or share. That couch may have cost him a few grand, but it certainly isn't built to sleep on.

Not wanting to put Ben through that, or for him to be hurled on by Darius in the middle of the night, he makes an offer.

“I only have the one guestroom, so if you want, my room is-”

“No thanks. The couch is fine.” Ben interrupts, walking right past him into the bathroom and closing the door.

Oh. Okay then.

Just as Kenji is about to leave, Ben pokes his head out of the bathroom, his eyes downcast.

"Thanks for inviting me. And for letting me stay."

"Oh. Yeah, of course."

Once again, Ben firmly closes the door, and once again, Kenji is left there very much confused by the other.

The whole night, Kenji found he couldn’t fall asleep easily. Maybe it’s because of the wine, maybe it’s because the food hasn’t digested yet. Though, the more likely reason is because under his roof is a sleeping Ben (and Darius).

He didn’t think his tendency to make jokes would lead to an awkward spell during an otherwise nice evening. Choosing his words carefully has never been a strong suit of his, but knowing who was going to be there, he probably should have had a little more self awareness. Not falling back into his habit of being passive aggressive with Ben is somewhat difficult- not because he *wants* to be that way, but because he was that way for so long.

Maybe Ben is starting to share that sentiment, considering what he said before bed. Still, there is certainly a lingering uncomfortableness that can't be helped, but they need to get over it to make this movie work. Like Darius said, this film shouldn't be a negative experience for Ben. Still, the guy brought him a plant- that he grew himself, apparently- as a housewarming present. That, and the fact he even showed up at all, says Kenji is making some kind of headway with the other.

Really, it's about getting reacquainted. An adjustment period was inevitable. When they first met years ago, it was a little awkward. Of course, what they have now is definitely going to be harder to overcome, but if they don't, one or more of them isn’t going to survive filming the movie.

The easiest solution would be for them to hang out more.

So, Kenji spends the rest of the night, until he falls asleep, thinking of what fun things he and Ben can do. To get reacquainted.

--

The table read for ‘In The Stars’ just finished, and Kenji is feeling more confident than ever that this film will be career defining in the best possible way.

Yaz and Sammy’s characters aren’t in it as much as he thought they’d be, but neither of them seemed particularly upset by this. Darius plays his best friend, which is the perfect role for him since that's what he is in real life. Brooklynn is playing his girlfriend turned fiance who lured him away from Ben, which on a meta level, is all kinds of f***d. Then there’s Ben, who plays his lover, who’s asking him to leave his normal life to be with him- asking him to just *choose* him, who's always been there for him and whom he loves dearly.

He knows Claire isn't privy to their history, but the uncanniness had him sweating bullets half the time.

During the entire read, he was reminded of the fact that all six of them are excellent actors. Sammy hasn't been in anything except television for years, but it certainly kept her sharp. Yaz was someone he was concerned with, since she's only done action and stunt work for a while now, but she slipped back into actor mode easily. Brooklynn, Darius, and Ben are all seasoned when it comes to films, as is Kenji, so no worries there.

No, the biggest concern Kenji has with the film is how the plot developments are going to **affect Ben.**

The other man is a professional, so he knows the subject matter wouldn't affect his performance. Still, with the plot hitting close to home, there were moments during the read that seemed genuine- almost as if he was talking to Kenji as himself and not as his character. If nothing else, that emotion should transfer well onto screen.

Now, if only they could work on their 'romantic' chemistry.

After the table read, Claire pulled Kenji aside and told him that the 'simmering animosity' was good, but that they needed to work on the 'longing' aspect of their character's relationship. Kenji thought they naturally exuded the appropriate amounts of both, but this proves to be a good excuse to get Ben to hang out more.

Since the 'housewarming' dinner, Kenji has asked the other to breakfast a few times, though they were only able to go once- and he's grateful for even getting that. Ben's schedule until filming starts is rather hectic, but thanks to Mae, he knows the other has a good three

days of downtime coming up.

So, he brings up that fact in a *totally natural way*.

“I hear you have some time off soon.” Kenji casually tells Ben as the two head down to the lobby in the same elevator.

Nailed it.

“Uh, yeah? What of it?” Ben asks, hesitancy plain in his voice.

“Well, I also happen to have a small gap in my schedule, and I figured–”

“No thanks. I want to relax without thinking about work.” The second the elevator doors open, Ben walks away quickly. Kenji, undeterred, follows after.

“Who said anything about work?”

“We just spent hours at a table read. We’re going to be filming together for months. Being with you is going to remind me of work.” Ben says dismissively.

Ouch.

“If Yaz or Darius asked you to hang out, would you?”

“Yeah.”

“What- But-”

“I’m not playing *romantic leads* with *them*. In fact, my character barely has any screentime with either of theirs. I'm going to be spending more time on set with you than anyone else.”

“But that’s exactly my point! We’re supposed to play the *romantic* leads, but according to Claire, our chemistry is *lacking.”*

Ben stops dead in his tracks.

“...she really said that?”

Got him.

“Yeah, and while I don’t agree,” Ben scoffs. “We need to spend more time together- build up some trust and understanding so we can deliver the best performance.”

Kenji kind of hates the fact that he has to put this in a professional context to make Ben even *consider* spending time with him, but at this point, he’ll take what he can get. Ben still stands there, his expression contemplative. He does that thing where he pouts his lips and furrows his brow. Kenji tries his hardest to keep a lid on what the sight does to his heart.

“Alright.”

Oh, thank goodness.

“Say I agree… What do we *do* to ‘get closer’ or whatever?”

“Well, since we’ve hung out at my house and gone out to eat already… I was thinking of going for a hike and maybe camping for a weekend?”

This is as much for himself as it is for Ben- Kenji discovered he had a love for rock climbing and does it on the regular. Though, he's never gone camping, but he's looking forward to trying it. He knows for a fact that Ben loves the outdoors and spending time away from the city, so this works out perfectly. Mae might have tipped him off, but he’s known this factoid since their time on CC together. When they had to shoot on location in some park or forest, Ben seemed to be in his element the most.

The way Ben’s eyes almost sparkle at Kenji's proposition is all the confirmation he needs from the other.

--

“Geez, do you think you packed enough?” Ben tells him sarcastically, gazing at Kenji's overstuffed backpack.

It’s the ass-crack of dawn and the pair drove out to Big Rock National Park to start their ‘bonding trip.’ Kenji thought he came perfectly prepared, packing things he thought he’d need on such an outing, but from the way Ben literally only brought a fold up tent, bedroll, and his

trusty fanny pack, Kenji considers he may be overprepared.

“We're going camping, right? We need to be ready for anything! You’re going to thank me when you need toilet paper and you’ve already run out.”

“I *didn’t* pack toilet paper.” Ben replies simply.

“None??”

“You don’t hike or go camping often, do you?” Ben says rather than asks.

“I go rock climbing! But... no, I've never gone camping. Though, I’ve done shoots where we had to stay in tents overnight.”

“They had chemical toilets, didn’t they?”

“...so?” Ben shakes his head at him, amused.

“TP is hazardous to wildlife. Besides, the idea is not to be encumbered by modern comforts. It’s just you and nature.”

“And carob bars?”

“Shut up. Food is always a good thing to pack.”

“I still can’t believe you eat those things unironically.”

“Well, since I had to carry them around with me for the entirety of season 1, I snacked on them between takes. They’re pretty good if you give ‘em a chance.”

“Whatever you say, Seanny.”

The hike starts out fine- without many people around, it's like they have the whole park to themselves. The weather is nice, despite it being fall, and the incline isn’t so bad. Though, by the time they took their first break, Kenji is more than ready for a little rest.

Then they get to *‘the real hike.’*

“We’re… going up there?” Kenji gripes as he stares at the rock formation standing before him.

“I thought you liked rock climbing?"

"Yeah, but I didn't pack for it. You should've told me."

"I didn't tell you because we're not gonna climb today. There's a trail that leads up to the top. Wait til you see it, the camping area is huge, and the view is amazing.”

“I'm sure it is...”

“C’mon, *RyRy,* I know you can handle it. Hiking is easier than climbing, right?” Ben says with a glint of mischief in his eye as he starts them on their way.

Kenji, egged on by the nickname and the tone of challenge in the other's voice, follows without complaint. That lasts all of ten minutes before he’s begging Ben for another break.

“Just a minute, okay? I– ugh- I need some water.”

“If you drink too much, you’ll feel bloated.”

“I know, I know. Just a sip.”

“For someone as muscley as you, you're not very fit, huh?” Ben teases as he stretches his calves.

“The muscles are for appearances, thank you very much.” Kenji labors out. “Other than climbing, I don't really get out much.”

“I can tell.”

“Ha ha.” Kenji takes another ‘sip’ of water, and slaps his face. The action startles Ben. “Okay! I’m ready to go!”

“If you’re sure…” Ben says dubiously.

“Nope! But I aint turning back now!”

Ben laughs- genuinely laughs- at that, and Kenji finds the sound invigorates him.

At least, until he needs another break of course.

--

By the time they reach the top, the sun is low in the sky, though it's not quite set.

"Got here a little later than I'd hoped, but at least we still got light." Ben muses as he starts setting up his tent. Kenji is collapsed on the ground, still trying to catch his breath. A gentle nudge from a boot to his shoulder gets him to look up.

"Wha?"

"C'mon, you should set up your tent. You do not wanna be doing that in the dark, trust me."

Kenji groans in response, wondering if Ben will be offended if he just freeclimbs his way back down and heads home. Still, he gets up and does what Ben says because clearly, the taller man knows best. He searches his pack, moving toiletries and food out of the way. Not finding what he's looking for, he dumps out the entire contents of the bag on the ground and sifts through every very necessary thing.

After five minutes, there is still no tent to be found.

He can't believe this.

"Don't tell me…" Ben groans.

"I, uh, forgot my tent." Kenji replies sheepishly. He glances past the other and sees his tent all set up. It looks like it might be big enough for both of them, though it would most likely be a tight fit.

"Did you at least bring a sleeping bag or bedroll?" Ben asks, already moving his stuff in the tent to make room for him.

"Uh, does a blanket count?"

Ben's head immediately pops out of the tent, an unimpressed and slightly exasperated expression on his face.

"Typical."

Soon enough, Kenji's things are moved into the very intimate sized tent, and Ben gets to work making a campfire for them. The food Kenji brought would be enough to feed them for the entire trip… but he also didn't bring a can opener or any kind of mess to eat them on.

So, carob bars and carob juice for dinner, with licorice rope for desert. They'll probably be eating that for the rest of the weekend. Plus, he'll have to lug the weight of all that uneaten food down the mountain at the end. Great.

At first, it's a little awkward. When he asked for sanitizer to clean his hands before eating, it looked like Ben was going to jump him. Kenji isn't sure what that was about. While they eat, they don't talk or anything, both of them kind of just staring at the campfire and listening to the crackling of the wood. Instead of all that food, maybe he should have brought his guitar. At least that way, they'd have a little entertainment.

He had to learn the instrument for a role where he played a musician down on his luck and finding his big break. Well, he didn't *have* to learn to play it, but he wanted the portrayal to be as authentic as possible. He even had singing lessons, but in the end, the studio dubbed over anything he sang or played.

Regardless, learning how to do these things put a love of music in him.

Well, even though he didn't bring a guitar with him, he still has his voice.

So, he starts to sing.

The song he sings is one he sings along to every time he hears it in his playlist or on the radio- and he'd be lying if the lyrics didn't instantly reminded him of Ben each and every time. If he's being even more honest, he has a whole playlist he made of songs that remind him of the guy he's currently sitting across from.

Kenji's voice isn't the most refined or stable, but he can carry a tune well enough. And the words, as he sings them, probably holds meaning to the other as well.

He doesn't dare to look up. Whatever expression Ben has on his face- whether it be confusion, anger, melancholy, or even antipathy- he

doesn’t want to see it. Because whichever it ends up being, he knows he’s going to break.

He literally could have sang anything else. Heck, he could have just bit the bullet and sat in silence. But the purpose of this trip- for them to get closer so their performances are more convincing- weighs heavy on his mind.

And what better way to get closer than to bear one’s soul through song? Probably a dozen other ways, but this is the one Kenji is going with.

A soft timbre joins his, startling him. When his eyes finally find Ben, the other is no longer staring blankly at the fire, his eyes closed. The shorter man's voice, which Kenji can only describe as *angelic*, blends into a harmony with his own.

He almost forgot how well the other can sing.

-7 years ago-

“It was so nice of your dad to pay for our trip!” Darius preens, excitedly looking out the van window.

“Ah, it’s nothing. We own the villa, so really it's just the airfare.”

“And the transport van and driver, since the most we have between us is a learner’s permit.” Yaz tacks on.

“I don’t even have that.” Ben laments. Kenji nudges him in the shoulder playfully.

“If you can get it when we get back, I can show you the ropes.” He offers cooly. The other boy offers him a grin.

“Oooh, since we’re offering, I can teach y’all to ride horses!” Sammy chimes in.

“Uh, pass. I did that once in Mexico, and nearly broke my leg.” Brooklynn grimaces.

As mentioned, Kenji’s dad paid for the six of them to go on a trip to Florida, where the man owns a private villa. Since half of them are sixteen, and the other half just about, their parents were more or less okay with them going alone.

This trip, as well as being a much needed vacation for hard working actors, serves as a way of congratulations. Camp Cretaceous was renewed for two more seasons- news all of them were waiting for. Who knows? If season 2 does well, they may get even more!

The elephant in the room however, is that one of them *won’t* be around next season.

Originally, his dad was going to only have the five of them go- with

Ben excluded since his character died. Kenji, however, put up a fight- something he rarely does. Regardless if they continue without him, he's their friend and a big part of the first season. No way were they going to go on this trip without him.

His dad relented, though only after he agreed to doing a commercial that the man already arranged for him to be in.

An hour later, they arrive at the Kon's beachside villa. All of them pour out of the van, excitedly running to the front door. Kenji strolls up, ready to punch in the passkey, only to be confronted with a blank screen.

"Huh…?"

He pushes everything, though to no avail. The thing won't light up. Everyone looks on in worry, the driver looking more and more impatient. Thankfully Brooklynn, with her ever expanding and frankly random skill set, is able to find the physical lock, and unlocks the door that way.

When they enter, nothing that runs on electricity works. The villa, for whatever reason, has no power.

Everyone looks to Kenji, panic seeming to set in among them. Honestly, he himself is also lowkey panicking. He finds the emergency numbers on the fridge and calls the electrician. The guy says he can't send anyone until lunchtime tomorrow, and though that does nothing to settle Kenji's nerves, he thanks the guy and shares the news with everyone.

"So, what? It's fine for now because it's daytime, but come nighttime…" Darius muses.

“We’ll be fine. The gas range doesn’t need electricity, so we can cook. There should be non-refrigerated food around somewhere.” he picks up a candle from a nearby table. “And look! We got light!”

Everyone looks at each other dubiously. Kenji rolls his eyes.

“Guys, don’t we play characters who go through worse? This is nothing!”

Yaz looks like she’s about to slap him, but Ben speaks up before she can.

“He’s right, guys. It’ll be fixed tomorrow afternoon. So we gotta deal with using candle’s tonight- no big deal. Besides, this shouldn’t stop us from having fun! We got a pool and the beach right outside!”

Kenji looks at Ben thankfully.

There's a whole other reason, that only Kenji knows about, as to why things are not quite up to par here. He asked his dad if it would be alright, but he assured Kenji things would still be working. Guess he should have checked before bringing everyone down here.

The others, though still hesitant, mumble words of agreement with Ben. They bring in their stuff, thank the driver who leaves soon after, and they're off to pick rooms.

An issue arises from that, too, however.

“There are only four rooms.” Brooklynn informs him.

“Well, me and Sammy can share.” Yaz offers, the Texan nodding in affirmation.

“I can sleep out here if-” Ben starts, but Kenji cuts him off.

“Me and Ben can share.” Kenji declares. Brooklynn and Darius look like they feel bad they’re the only ones getting their own rooms, but everyone is quick to start unpacking, assuaging them.

Soon enough, he and Ben are alone in his- sorry, *their* room.

“You sure you’re okay sharing with me? Like I said, I can sleep outside–”

“That couch is not as comfortable as it looks. Trust me.” Kenji is quick to assure him. “Though, fair warning, I’ve been known to mumble in my sleep.”

Ben snorts at that, and Kenji finds he’s laughing as well.

“I don’t mind. Thanks, Kenji.”

Soon enough, the six of them head to the pool and chill there until sunset. They light the candles and head inside, all of them enjoying a hearty dinner of instant ramen, of which there is an abundance of.

They pass the time telling ghost stories, which finds Ben gripping onto his arm at ‘scary’ bits. The shorter teen’s grip is stronger than he expected, but Kenji will admit, he kind of likes that Ben finds comfort in holding onto him.

Why that is, however, he can't figure out.

When it seems Ben has had enough, he suggests they do something else.

“Does anyone have any secret talents? You know, besides telling scary stories.”

“Thank you, Kenj.” Darius says gratefully.

“I can wrangle a calf in fifteen seconds flat.” Sammy says. “Though, unless one of you wants to be the calf, I can’t exactly show that off.”

“I guess I'm good at drawing, but unless you got paper and better lighting that ain't happening.” Yaz shares in an uncharacteristically shy manner. Sammy seems excited by this.

“I can sort of play the piano. My dad taught me a little.” Darius offers.

“Sorry, D. We aint got one here.” Kenji laments.

“I can sing.” Brooklynn says nonchalantly.

“What, really? Like, professionally?”

“Eh, my dads hired someone to train me classically. They said it’s good to be well rounded.”

“Well, don’t hold out on us!” Sammy chimes in. “C’mon girl, sing us something.”

"Five bucks says she's not that good." Yaz not-so-subtly whispers to the Texan.

Brooklynn playfully rolls her eyes, but she stands anyway and starts belting out a beautiful aria. Even though Kenji has no real knowledge about music, he can tell the girl was telling the truth about being trained. He doesn’t recognize the song, but she sings it beautifully.

At one point her eyes meet his, just as she crescendos, and he swears his face heats up.

When she finishes, they all burst into applause and the pink-haired girl takes exaggerated bows.

“So, you weren't lying.” Yaz teases, the pink haired girl sticking her tongue out at her in reply.

"Better pay Sammy that five bucks." Darius chuckles.

“What about you, Ben? Any ‘secret talents’?” Kenji asks. Ben looks up at him surprised by the query. He stutters for a second, his gaze averted, but he manages to get a few words out.

“Oh… Uh, well- I’m not trained like Brooklynn, but-”

“You can sing, too?” Kenji perks up, for some reason more excited than anyone at this revelation.

“Kind of? My mom always asks me to sing for her and she tells me I should try for musical roles.”

“Well now you *have* to show us.” Darius speaks up. “You know, if you want.”

“Sure…” Ben says with reluctance clear in his voice.

The shorter teen hesitantly stands up, all eyes on him- Kenji's especially.

The moment the first few notes leave the other boy’s mouth, Kenji is in a trance. He’s rough around the edges, clearly not trained like Brooklynn is, but he has the most angelic voice he’s ever heard. He sings a pop song from the 80s he sort of recognizes, his voice growing more confident the longer he goes on.

Kenji doesn’t once look away. His voice has a hold on him, like a siren song, one that he admittedly wouldn't mind getting caught in.

When he finishes, everyone applauds, just like they did with Brooklynn. Ben doesn't bow, but just sort of smiles awkwardly and takes his seat again next to Kenji.

"Dude, you're great!" Darius praises.

"Yeah, Ben, we should totally duet one day." Brooklynn adds on. "Oh, I did hear about a movie adaptation of 'Dogs' in the works. Maybe we should go audi-"

"I don't know if I'm ready for *that.* Thanks, though." Ben tells her. The girl just shrugs with a smile.

"Eugh, Kenji, did you not put on sunblock or something? Your face is all red." Yaz points out.

What?

He pulls out his phone and sees that indeed, his cheeks are rosy. Though, he gets a feeling it isn't from the sun today.

He quickly laughs it off and distracts everyone by offering to show off his secret talent: dancing.

It… does not go well. At least they got a laugh from it.

After almost dying while washing dishes by candle-light, everyone turns in for the night.

Kenji slips into bed without a second thought, lying on his side facing away from the door. After a moment passes, he looks over his shoulder and sees Ben just standing there, fidgeting with his shirt.

“Dude, you gonna get in?”

“Uh, maybe I should–”

Oh not this again.

“Just get in already.” Kenji sits up and grabs Ben by the arm, the other letting out an undignified yelp at the sudden move. Suddenly, Ben is on top of him, looking down at him with those massive blue eyes of his.

Kenji is sure his face is as red as it was earlier.

With another yelp, Ben flips over so he’s on his side of the bed. He lies on his side, facing away from Kenji. Kenji does much the same, the two now facing opposite directions. Even so, Kenji can feel the warmth radiating off of the other, bringing him some comfort from the somewhat chilly seaside air entering the room from the open window.

It takes him a while to find sleep, but when he does, the sweet vocals of Ben are on his mind, as is the fact the other is mere inches from him.

-present-

When he and Ben come to the final note, the brunete's eyes finally find his own.

Instead of an admonishing look for the song choice, Ben offers him a smile, the sight doing numbers on Kenji's heart- though he won't let it show.

"You could use some lessons." Ben teases.

"Oh, you should have heard me years ago. This is me *after* lessons."

"Hmm, gotta say, it's been some time since I've sang."

"Really? If I had a voice like yours, I'd never shut up."

"You don't anyway." Ben smirks.

The comment catches him a little off guard, but Kenji finds the snarkyness welcome. He learned a long time ago that Ben can be quick witted, and usually, the more insulting he is- as opposed to passive aggressive- the more comfortable he is.

So, Kenji plays along.

“What? You don’t like how much I talk?” Kenji whines, with an exaggerated and horribly done British accent. Ben, despite himself, laughs.

“Shut up. God, you’re so annoying.” he manages between laughs.

“You think this is annoying??” Kenji keeps going, accent thicker than before.

“You’re always annoying.” Ben replies, in his own kind of bad British accent. The pair are hysterically laughing after that. It takes them a minute to calm down. Afterwards, Ben has an embarrassed look on his face.

“You know, I almost auditioned for a BBC drama once. Took me a while, but I thought I had the accent down. One day, I showed it off to Mae, and she personally called the American office to tell them I won’t be showing up for the audition.”

“Oh my God, that’s brutal-” Kenji wheezes out. Ben joins him again.

This. This is exactly the atmosphere Kenji wanted. They’re having fun, messing around, being comfortable together again- and this is only their first night here!

After a while, when the fire is almost out, Ben heads into the tent and calls it a night. Kenji follows close behind. The tent would fit one person comfortably, but for the two of them- and Kenji’s massive backpack- they’re lucky if they can lie side by side. They're both over

six feet tall and muscular, after all.

It does take some maneuvering, but Ben manages to not only make his bedroll spread out so they can both lie on it, but has Kenji slotted right next to him comfortably. Which, by the way, means Kenji is practically spooning the other man.

If Ben minds, he doesn't say anything.

Kenji's not sure what he's supposed to do with his hands. This isn't the first time they've slept next to each other, but in those other situations, he didn't need to think about it. Since most of what he wishes he could do isn't an option, he settles for wrapping them around himself under the blanket he brought.

The bedroll is comfortable enough, but Kenji has a hard time falling asleep. Ben doesn't seem to share the sentiment; soft snores come from the other soon after they settle in. So, Kenji lies there in silence, willing that sleep comes his way.

Then Ben turns over and is facing him- though, he's still asleep.

Kenji risks looking down at his sleeping face, admiring Ben's long eyelashes and handsome face. Not only is he taller than Kenji, but he bulked up a bit and his features became more squared. Still, despite this, he's still the adorable Ben he remembers from long ago. The brunette's lips are parted as he snores softly. He looks so peaceful, very different from the scowling Ben he reunited with a few weeks ago. Kenji would be glad to never see Ben look at him like that again.

Considering his track record, that may be asking too much.

Still, for right now, Ben is okay being near him like this, and that's okay with him.

Kenji does something incredibly stupid and incredibly risky: he gently wraps his arm around Ben, essentially cuddling the other man. When Ben doesn't react, Kenji settles in, sighing in content as he does.

Despite his heart racing as he looks at the other, sleep doesn't take long to find him- now that Ben is in his arms once again, even if it's not in the most ideal circumstance.

Maybe one day.

Yeah, right. Idiot.

For now, all he hopes for is not getting a broken nose when Ben wakes up tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Sanctuary by Joji

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading!

Did I really write a ‘there was only one bed’ scenario? Damn right I did lol

I never had to draw the inserts and write at the same time, so I think I’m going to keep up this pace of 2-3 chapters uploaded first, then draw the inserts afterwards. I might go insane otherwise lol

Aiming for Sunday, 11/27, for chapter 5!
EDIT: A little ambitious of me to aim for that lol Gonna try for Thursday, 12/1 instead (busy for a couple of days) Thanks for understanding!
EDIT 2: I've been sick and still am, so writing has been kind of hard ;((I'm going to try for Tuesday, 12/6!

Soft Spot

Chapter Summary

Ben starts getting used to Kenji again

Chapter Notes

Hello! Sorry this got delayed like 3 times ^^; Hope you enjoy!

Ben POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ben has barely been awake for a minute and he’s already mad as heck.

Honestly, he should have foreseen this.

He knew something like this was going to happen when they discovered Kenji ‘forgot’ his tent. Yeah, right. The guy probably didn't bring it on purpose so he and Ben would have to share. To what end, you might ask?

So he can cuddle with Ben in his tiny tent- like he’s doing right now. This is probably some convoluted way for them to ‘get closer so they have more screen chemistry.’ Hell, *that* was probably a lie too.

Ben let his guard down. He let Kenji sway him with those big brown eyes of his, giving in the second the guy looked all sad and embarrassed that he didn’t bring something so fundamental to camping. Still, what was Ben supposed to do? Let the guy freeze by himself outside? Especially when he knows for a fact that Kenji hates the cold? He's not that mean.

Though, from the way he's holding onto Ben, hot as a furnace, he may very well have been fine.

God, he forgot how warm Kenji could be- something he always liked about the other. Ben has bulked a little since last they did this, thus warmer than when he was a beanpole, but the added warmth is still welcome. Back when they were on Camp Cretaceous together, Kenji always seemed to be nearby to warm him up between takes.

Until he wasn't.

Ben's initial reaction to discovering the shorter man spooning him and practically nuzzling his face into his back was to kick him and his stupidly warm body out of the tent- see him scramble in confusion before Ben zips his tent back up again, leaving him outside where he belongs.

But how long has it been since he's been in Kenji's arms like this?

Not since the guy got with Brooklynn, that's for sure. Not since he was shorter than him, either.

And since then, Kenji's arms and chest have gotten even bigger... stronger... warmer…

...

Ah, screw it.

Ben doesn't move. He's most definitely going to regret this later, but for right now, he doesn't care. Right now, all he cares about is how long he can indulge in the personal furnace that is Kenji before the man wakes up and they both pretend it never happened.

"So cuddly…" Kenji murmurs sleepily.

Oh. Crap, is he awake?

After a moment of nothing, Ben relaxes again.

Of course the guy isn't awake. If he was, he'd have panicked and removed himself from Ben. After all, that was Ben's initial reaction. Though, if he's not awake, then why is he talking…

Maybe he is *awake? Ben is sure Kenji did all this on purpose, so who's to say he isn't faking it right now? He probably-*

"A giant marshmallow? Thank you, mermaid…"

Ah.

It's been so long, Ben forgot about these particular nuggets of information regarding the taller man- talking in his sleep and dreaming of mermaids.

"Mmm- tastes like… sushi…"

Ben stifles a laugh.

As strange and possibly annoying this probably will be, he still doesn't wake him, content on getting the full Kenji experience, as it were. Though, he hopes his ramblings about food don't go on for much longer or Ben will have to shove him off and see what they can do about breakfast.

--

"...so you just, what, went back to sleep?" The discerning voice of Bumpy asks, this time in person and not over the phone.

The pair sit at a cafe, one hidden away in some back alley where Ben is confident people won't recognize him. That said, he's still wearing his go-to 'camouflage' which is just a hat and a hoodie. You know, just in case.

It's been a few days since he and Kenji's weekend camping trip came to an end and he's finally lined their schedules up so he can vent about it in person.

"Hardly. The guy was mumbling in his sleep the whole time. I forgot how much he did that."

"And you didn't wake him up?" she asks, taking a sip of her tea.

"Well, I didn't want to be rude-"

“Ben. It’s *me* you’re talking to.” She eyes him. He eyes her back, but his resolve weakens under her gaze.

“Fine. Yeah, I *let* him hold me. Shut up.”

“I like it better when you’re honest.” She smiles.

“I liked it better when you didn’t know every little detail about me.” Bumpy scoffs.

“Uh, whose fault is that?”

Ben doesn’t say anything to that. They sit in silence for a bit, enjoying their hot drinks on this chilly autumn day. The cafe is practically empty, with only an elderly woman and her dog sitting in there with them. There is no foot traffic to be had, so it’s no surprise. With such a quiet atmosphere, Ben doesn’t mind risking a look out the window to admire the changing leaves.

“Anyway, why did you let him do that, you think?” Bumpy asks, going straight for the jugular.

“I don’t wanna talk about that anymore. There were some other things that weekend that-”

“You really missed him, huh?”

“Me? *Miss* Kenji? Please. After everything, you think-”

“If you *didn’t* miss him, then why’d you let him cuddle you? Why agree to go on a trip alone with him, ‘chemistry’ be damned? Why go to his housewarming? Or watch the video I sent to Mae? Once or twice is an accident, but there’s a pattern of behavior here.”

“I- You- Bumpy. You’re supposed to be on *my* side.” He says exasperated, not expecting to be confronted like this. “Why are you so *insistent* that I… I’m going *soft* when it comes to Kenji?”

“Aren’t you?” She states, no question in her voice. “With everything you’ve told me, you hardly sound like someone who wants to avoid his ex. You don't even have the urge to use sanitizer around him anymore. Doctor Harding would be proud. It sounds to me like you miss him and you just don’t want–”

“I just really want to do the film, okay?!” He practically yells, not liking what she’s saying one bit. He doesn’t need to look to know the staff and the old woman are now looking his way. “It’s nothing deeper. He’s in it, so I just gotta suck it up. End of story.”

Her eyes have hardened a bit, but they have not once looked away.

Ben has only snapped at her once before, and it was over something stupid. At that time, she looked so hurt. She ran away and didn’t speak to him for a week. Back then, they were also talking about Kenji, and she, like now, implied something he didn’t want to hear.

Now, they’re both older, and both know how the other is. They’re practically siblings at this point, so he knows she isn’t just saying stuff for the hell of it.

She's right.

Over the past few weeks, he's gotten used to having Kenji around again, and even though that was unthinkable not that long ago, Ben won't lie and say he hates it. And it's actually amazing to him that he's been able to control his sanitizing tic.

Ben may telling the truth about the movie being a driving force, but Bumpy is dead-on in saying him missing Kenji has everything to do with why they're hanging out so often.

But what does that say about him?

*After everything that man put him through, he can just move on and be friends again? That he lets himself be held by him? Let himself… **feel** things again?*

He doesn't like the answer.

But that's *not* Bumpy's fault.

"I'm sorry." He sighs.

"Me too." She says immediately.

“You’re always on my side, even when I’m wrong. I shouldn’t have… snapped.”

“I’m being pushy, like always. You were bound to snap at one point.”

They sit there awkwardly for a bit. The atmosphere is a little uncomfortable, but honestly, he’ll take this over her running away from him again. After a moment, Bumpy puts her hand on the table, holding it out for him. His hand finds hers.

“I’m only trying to help you work through this. I’m not here to judge you or tell you what to do or how to feel.”

“I know.”

“But if you won’t even admit it to me, I’m afraid that you’re going to get in your head again, and one day, just…”

“I know, I know.” He says again, knowing where she’s going with this.

“Okay? Sorry, though. I know this whole situation is... delicate.”

“You’re the only one who knows why, and I’m so grateful you hear me out every time.” He tells her sincerely. She smirks at him.

“You kidding? I got insider knowledge about possibly the juiciest scandal in Hollywood. Talk to me anytime.” She jokes. He laughs,

despite the dig at himself.

“Well, if I see some scandalous headlines about me, I know who gabbed.”

“Never gonna find me. Gonna take all that tabloid money and buy myself a nice little island off Costa Rica or something.”

“I don’t think there are islands there…”

They both laugh, the atmosphere back where it should be.

The old lady and her dog leave though, glaring at them as she passes by. They laugh again as soon as she’s out of sight.

--

Costume fitting day is normally a boring day filled with hours of just sitting around, followed by another few hours of just standing still while a costume director or seamstress measures you and holds up swatches to match skin tones. Today is much the same, though this will be the first time in years he’s done it with some company.

“She really wants us to match, huh?” Kenji comments as he sips on a latte, watching as Ben is being subjected to the whims of the costume department. In the last two minutes, they’ve shoved several swatches of blue fabric next to his face, trying to find one that’s ‘just right.’

“I get that color is a big part of storytelling, but I swear the last few

were the exact same." The seamstress in charge for today eyes him, but Ben ignores her. "It also doesn't help that this is a period piece. They're going to be really picky."

"I don't think I've ever heard someone call a movie set in the 80's a *period piece* before." Kenji chuckles.

"Anyway, why were they so quick with you?" Ben grunts out as someone shoves a jacket on him and takes a few pictures.

"Oh, me and Jean have worked together before. She knows what matches me. Don't you, Jean?"

The seamstress gives Kenji a polite smile, then immediately goes back to practically glaring at Ben. That, or, she's really focused on her job and he's just being paranoid. Either way, her piercing gaze is a little unsettling.

They take the jacket- and his shirt for some reason- off of him, and now Ben stands on the pedestal shirtless. Kenji wolf whistles and Ben rolls his eyes.

"You love the outdoors so much. How are you still so pale?"

"Sunblock. You should look into it, or do you like having wrinkles?" Ben eyes the shorter man through the mirror in front of him. He sees him scoff, but after a moment, he busts out his phone and looks himself over. Ben doesn't do a good job of hiding his laughter.

"Yuck it up, Ben. Ladies love a good tan, you know?"

Ben almost laughs again at how much that comment absolutely has *nothing* to do with him.

“And you know that *how?* You’ve literally dated one girl ever.”

“I do a little vanity scrolling once in a while. I always see people sharing photos of actors on the beach.”

“Are you sure that isn’t more to do with them being shirtless than it is the tans?”

“Yeah, but tans definitely get people going.”

“If you say so.” The seamstress grabs a flannel shirt and hands it to Ben. The second he finishes putting it on, she starts shoving a varsity jacket on him.

“This is the 80s, right? Shouldn't there be more... denim?”

Both the seamstress and Kenji scoff, and Ben rather jump in the maw of a Rex than be here right now.

Since he has to put up with this for quite a while more, his mind wanders to another time he dealt with stressful costume designing.

-7 years ago-

Season two for Camp Cretaceous is well into pre-production, and so far, no one except Ben and Scott, the showrunner, know that his character Sean is set to return. No one gave the scripts past episode five to the cast, with episode six being a solo episode explaining where Sean has been the whole time, and episode seven being his triumphant return.

That's why Ben is here alone as they're working on his updated look, as the others are doing their own fittings elsewhere, unaware of his imminent participation.

"I get that he's been through a lot, but does Sean have to be so… dirty?" He asks the makeup artist, who's showing him concept renders of what he'll look like. "And my outfit is so ripped up. I'm gonna rip it more accidentally, I just know it."

"We're making you look badass, kid. Enjoy it!" She tells him.

He thought the seamstresses were going to just rip up some of his old costumes to go for authenticity, but according to them, it would be impractical for him to wear for longer shoots. Instead, they are painstakingly crafting costumes that look like his old one just all torn up, but with the durability and functionality for him to work with.

So now, he finds himself being painstakingly measured over and over, the designers laser focused on getting everything right.

When they finally tell him he can take a break, he sighs as he sinks into the sofa they keep in the workshop.

A jingle from his pocket catches his attention. He perks up immediately, checking his phone. A text from Kenji flashes on his screen. When he opens it, he's greeted with several pictures of Kenji at his own costume fitting, the others also featured in several of them.

Ben smiles as he saves each one to his phone.

Big_Ben: you guys look great! Though, don't let them catch you sending them to me.

King_Kon: it's not breaking nda if it's to a cast member, right?

Big_Ben: former*

Ben frowns, hating that he has to lie to the others, especially Kenji. Immediately, another message from Kenji comes in.

King_Kon: Wish you were here with us :((

Ben's cheeks redden at the comment.

That's been happening a lot with him lately. Kenji will do or say

something nice or friendly to him, and Ben feels his face heat up. His heart seems to beat faster when he's around the other boy as well. There will be times it's only the two of them, whether it's just them mucking around or watching something, and Ben keeps those memories in a special place in his heart.

Ben isn't stupid. He *knows* what those are signs of. Further still, he knows nothing will come of it anyway, so why worry? It'll probably go away if he ignores it, so that's what he does and will continue to do.

Big_Ben: Me too. Don't worry about me, though! Have fun! Tell everyone I said hi!

He wishes he could tell him. He wished the others could know already that he's rejoining them. But for whatever reason, Scott seems to think getting a genuine reaction from them when he shows up will be better in the end. Who is Ben to argue with that?

Still… would it be breaking NDA if he snapped a selfie of himself right now? Sure, the other might recognize the room, but there's nothing that would imply what it is he's actually working on. As far as Kenji and the others know, Ben is working on some commercial. That, and, sending a picture may let them keep their conversation going, and Ben would very much like that.

Deciding against potentially getting fired, he pockets the phone and waits for the costume designers to call him again.

And if he made one of the photos Kenji sent him as his screen background, that's Ben's business.

-present-

When they're finally done with Ben, they throw a quick test outfit on him and Kenji and take a few concept photos. Just like Ben thought, denim and leather are present in both their outfits. Still, to their credit, these guys know what they're doing- he and Kenji look like they stepped out of a time machine, with very specific tones of blue assigned to each of them.

"Wow! Don't you two look like the sweetest couple." Sings the familiar voice of Claire. She walks in with a few assistants, all of them handing things to her and taking things away. "You're going to look great for the ML cover shoot."

Ben quirks a brow at that. He immediately looks at Kenji, who looks just as confused as him.

"We- what?" He asks.

"The ML cover shoot? And interview? I swear I told your-" She stops mid sentence, closes her eyes in annoyance, then turns to one of her assistants. Franklin, if Ben is correct. "The memos I told you about a couple of days ago. You sent them out, right?"

The guy looks like a deer caught in headlights. Claire looks to her other assistant, Zara, who looks just as lost. The last assistant, Zia, shrugs even before Claire can look at her. She sighs exaggeratedly then turns back to the two of them.

“So, great news! In a week, you two are going to do an interview for ML and were chosen to be the cover models of the winter issue!”

“What, really?”

“They specifically reached out to us. Thanks to Mr Kon here’s viral interview, many magazines are interested in talking to him. I figured, since the announcement for the movie is coming out soon, we can use the interview they want to promote it!”

“Huh. Makes sense.” Kenji says.

“Don’t they only use one model for the covers?” Ben asks.

“Normally, yes, but I have a friend at the magazine who was able to convince his higher ups to have both of you on. They’ll be the first to interview you two about the movie, so they were more than willing. It works out perfectly.”

Ben has only been a cover model once, and it was for a weekly entertainment magazine. Not exactly prestigious but he was grateful for even that. Normally, only A-List celebs grace the cover of ML, and the idea that he will join his more famous peers excites him, even if it’s shared with a co-star.

Suddenly, an important detail sticks out in his head.

This was supposed to be a *solo* cover shoot and *solo* interview- just Kenji. Because of Claire, he has to share the spotlight with Ben, and

the two are supposed to use it to promote their movie. If the roles were reversed, Ben isn't sure he would take it well, regardless of the fact it's a great promotional opportunity.

He glances at Kenji, whose expression he can't really read.

"You know," Ben starts, "It isn't necessary for me to be there. They just wanted Kenji, right? I'm sure he can-"

"No can do. It's all arranged and everything."

"But I think-"

"Oh, shoot, I have a meeting in five. Sorry, boys! I'll catch you later. You look great! Bye!" The red-haired woman is out of there quickly, her gaggle of helpers scrambling to keep up.

Once again, Ben glances at Kenji who this time is looking back at him. His expression is almost… sad. Worried, even. Aw, geez. It's just like he thought- the guy doesn't like the idea of sharing the spotlight. Ben can't say he blames him.

The costume department has them change a few more times, but soon enough, the pair are done for the day. Kenji happened to give him a ride, so they both made their way to the parking lot… in awkward silence.

It isn't until Kenji's car revs to life do either of them speak. In fact, they both speak at the same time, their voices overlapping one another.

“Sorry, you go first.” Ben tells him. The taller man grimaces, then turns towards him.

“Do you… not want to do this movie with me?”

What…?

“What gave you that idea?”

“I mean, I get that you wouldn't want to, and that’s my fault, but… we’re supposed to be playing a romantic couple. Besides, we’re kind of past the point of having second thoughts. You can’t not come to interviews, yeah? It’ll look bad.”

“I never said I didn’t want to. I’ve been waiting for a role like this for years.”

Kenji pouts- like, literally pouts.

“Then why were you trying to get out of doing the ML stuff with me?”

Oh.

OH.

Ben almost laughs, the pieces finally clicking. Kenji isn’t mad that he

has to share the spotlight. He's mad because he thinks *Ben* doesn't want to share it with him.

It's honestly kind of **cute.** Which he will never say out loud.

"I wasn't trying to get out of it, I just thought it was kind of rude of Claire to volunteer me to what was supposed to be *your* cover shoot."

"I don't mind, though."

"I can see that now, yeah."

A silence returns between them, the only sound in this car the quiet purr of the engine.

"So," the taller man starts, "you *don't* mind doing ML with me?"

"You kidding? I've never done a serious magazine cover before. My time to shine." He teases. Kenji playfully rolls his eyes.

"Don't act like you didn't kill it in that entertainment magazine. I have like, four copies of that." Kenji laughs, finally pulling them out of the parking lot, his normally jovial mood returning.

The ride back to his place is pleasant, but the whole time, Ben can't stop thinking about the implication of Kenji admittingly owning multiple copies of the only magazine Ben has been on the cover of. The only other person who openly admits to owning that thing is his mom, for obvious reasons. Why *Kenji* did, however, is a mystery to

him.

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“So, shoot first, then interview in the green room after.” an excited Coordinator for ML tells Ben as he’s getting his makeup done. He not so softly sighs at the information.

“We’re doing them *both* today?”

“The shoot shouldn’t be all that long.” Mae assures him. “You and Kenji will be doing solo shots for the article, then several together for the cover. Two hours tops. The interview should be less than one.”

“Any idea which writer they got for us?”

“I believe it’s… Tim Murphy.” Ben groans at the answer, scrunching his face in annoyance, which earns him a disapproving tut from the makeup artist.

“Ugh… I was hoping it wasn’t. Did you read the interview he did for Alan Grant?”

“I thought it was nice. He grew up loving his movies and was happy to meet his hero.”

“Yeah, but he kept asking him really… *strange* questions. And it’s not like he was only like that with him- The one with Ian Malcolm was also…”

“Strange?” Mae finishes for him.

“Guy really gets in your face. I wonder if I can still get out of this.” He jokingly ponders aloud.

“Wouldn’t want to offend him. You know who his grandfather is?”

“Yeah, yeah. Biggest dynasty in Hollywood and all that. That uncle of his is a real piece of work, though.” Ben says dismissively. “I guess I shouldn't complain. I mean, when am I ever going to be in this magazine again?”

“After ‘In The Stars’, people are going to be begging to interview you.” Mae says confidently. Normally, she’s reserved, not really one to overstate anything. Her genuine comment has Ben smiling, though it earns him another tut from the woman currently trying to put foundation on his face.

Soon enough, Ben is all dolled up- a simple black suit, the dress shirt with the top buttons undone, his hair styled in a way that doesn’t distract from his face, and some contouring to ‘emphasize his cheekbones’. Not the most extravagant thing he’s worn before, but he certainly feels like a proper model.

Kenji is nowhere to be found, though Ben is assuming they’re getting him ready to go after him. The photographer takes shot after shot of Ben. He strikes different poses, holds different props, and offers different expressions. When they’re done, the assistant calls for him to come look at what they have so far.

Before he can get a proper look, Kenji finally emerges from his own

waiting room.

Ben swears he goes lightheaded from how quickly the blood went to his cheeks just looking at the other man. Just like Ben, he's wearing all black, though he's sporting a leather jacket and black jeans to match. The army boots he's got on are laced tight, and every heavy step echoes in the hall they're using for the shoot.

If that wasn't enough, his face is overkill. A touch of smokey-eyed makeup along with his hair slicked back make him look like a touch dangerous.

It's really unfair how attractive this guy is.

"Hey, Seanny. Looking good." Kenji tells him as he makes his way over. He looks over the shots with Ben, making comments about which ones he likes, though Ben doesn't remember much of what he said. He's still distracted by the towering figure invading his space.

"You gonna stick around? We got ours right after." Kenji asks, breaking Ben of his dazed state.

"Might as well. Gotta see how a professional does it, after all." Ben teases.

Kenji smirks and winks at him, before sauntering over to where the photographer wants him. Ben may or may not have watched his ass the whole time he walked away.

Watching the man work, it's obvious he's done this several times before. Ben admits, he's never actually seen Kenji on the cover of

anything, but then, that's because he ignores celebrity focused magazines as often as he can. Regardless, he can easily imagine Kenji being on many other covers before this.

Before Kenji is done, an assistant comes over with a different jacket, and Ben changes quickly. Following her is the makeup artist who touches him up. By the time he's done, Kenji is looking over his own shots, singling out a few that he thinks are nice.

Soon enough, the pair of them are now in front of the lens, with Kenji also getting a minor wardrobe change. He shed the leather jacket, but instead of donning something else, he stays clad only in his simple white wife-beater. Even with just that, he looks great, much to Ben's chagrin.

The photographer doesn't seem to be feeling the standing poses, so he has the crew clear the stage and lay down a carpet. He sets him and Kenji up how he likes, on the ground looking up at the camera, and once again a flurry of flashes go off as he takes photo after photo. From the corner of his eye, he can see Mae taking her own photo of them with her phone.

After apparently getting the shot he wanted, the photographer calls them over to look over his work. The one he pulls up is gorgeous, both of them kind of pouting at the camera. After some work in post, Ben is sure this will be an eye-catching cover.

"Thanks for your hard work!" He tells them, as the crew around them applauds politely. After things settle down, they're being ushered by the same young Coordinating Assistant from earlier to the green room. They don't even get a few minutes to change or even breathe.

When they enter the room, it's apparent why; Tim Murphy, prodigal grandson of John Hammond-once the richest executive producer in

Hollywood- and brother to Lex Murphy- a starlet and animal rights activist- is already here.

He smiles at them brightly, and as friendly as he seems, Ben knows something is going to go down during this interview.

“I’m so sorry you guys had to be rushed here. I’m swamped for the rest of the week, so if we don't do this now, it isn’t happening.” He tells them apologetically. Kenji waves his hand dismissively.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. We’re used to this kind of workload.”

“That’s great to hear.”

“Can we get water or something though?” Ben asks. The CA is quick to grab some for all of them. When they’re all settled in, Tim pulls out his laptop and already begins typing.

“So, let's get it out of the way. Congrats on coming out.” he says squarely to Kenji. The shorter man laughs.

Oh, here we go.

“Thanks.”

“I gotta say, I didn’t expect it. But more than that, I didn’t expect you to do it through a *youtuber* of all people.”

“Well, like Gray said, his brother went through something similar so I knew he’d have tact about it.”

“I can understand that. Anyway, what’s this I hear about you starring in a gay romance movie?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a big project. Masrani Studios, Claire Deering wrote it, and I think they got Henry Wu directing.”

“All of that is headline worthy, no doubt. But those aren’t the only things I hear is interesting about this project.”

“Yeah,” Ben answers, “This will be the first time since Camp Cretaceous ended that all six of the main cast are going to be together in the same project.”

“Which is super exciting, trust me. Loved that show. But… isn’t it weird that you and Brooklynn are going to be working on something together so soon after breaking up?” Tim directs his attention back to Kenji. The other man sighs at the question, obviously expecting it to be brought up.

“Like I said to Gray, we’re still friends, so it won’t be-”

“Not to interrupt,” Tim interrupts, “but it can’t help that she’s reportedly playing your girlfriend in the movie.”

“She is playing that, yes, but we’re both professionals. Besides, the focus of the film is about me and Ben's characters.”

Ah. Ben is glad he's back in this conversation, albeit from a comment from Kenji.

"Let's talk about that for a second."

"Yes, *please."* Ben says, almost exasperatedly. He can hear Kenji chuckle softly next to him.

"Since Kenji came out, people will take his performance as credible. You've never worked in romance before, right? Certainly not in the gay genre either." Tim addresses him.

Wow. This guy doesn't mince words, does he?

"While I'm sure the reunion was certainly a factor, was there a special reason you accepted the role?"

"Do I *need* one?" Ben asks curtly.

"Well, no, but it's not everyday someone who plays the roles you do takes on roles like this."

Ben knows he isn't trying to be insulting. He knows this is just how he talks, though it has garnered him a bit of a reputation for it. He expected it was going to be like this, so he shouldn't get upset. That said, he'd really like to be literally anywhere else right now.

"This may come as a surprise to you, but I've been waiting for a role like this since I started acting."

“Really? Romance in general, or a gay specifically?”

“Both.”

“And why is that-”

“Because I’m gay, Tim. *That’s* why.” Ben practically shouts, the volume of his voice startling everyone in the room.

Tim looks at him in shock, though his hands don’t stop typing away.

Oh.

Oh SHIT.

What did he just do??

Ben looks to his left, and sees the concerned face of Mae looking at him, surprise clear in her expression. He wanted to have a proper interview with someone with the intention of coming out, like Kenji did, but now he’s gone and blurted it out. The world is going to find out Ben Pincus, age 22, is gay, because he couldn’t control his temper doing a magazine interview.

Then Ben turns to his right, where Kenji sits.

The other's cheeks are bright red, and his eyes are smiling, his hand covering his mouth. Kenji is trying to hold back his laughter with everything he's got, but looks seconds away from cracking.

"You're-" Tim starts, but is interrupted by the raucous laughter of Kenji, who couldn't hold it anymore. The sound is infectious, and as mortified as Ben was mere seconds ago, the absurdity of everything catches up to him, and he joins the shorter man in his reverie.

Whether anyone else is laughing, Ben doesn't know. But he hasn't heard a sweeter sound than his and Kenji's laughter mingling, a sound he hasn't heard since their days on Camp Cretaceous. Just like that, he's transported back to a time when everything was simpler.

Ben doesn't remember much of the rest of the interview. Tim kept trying to ask more questions about Ben's confession, but Mae was quick to keep them on track and talk more about the film. After another half hour of questions, they're finally done for the day.

On his way back to change, Kenji pulls him aside.

"Hey, can we talk after? I can give you a ride back."

"Oh. Uh, sure?"

Minutes later, Ben is changed and plain faced. Mae leaves without him per his request, so he's left to look for Kenji. He eventually finds the taller man waiting for him near the exit, dressed down in a simple tracksuit.

They hop in Kenji's car, and it isn't until they get on the onramp does Kenji say anything.

"So… how do you feel about finally coming out publicly?"

"Ugh… I was gonna do something similar to what you did, but Tim was being so-"

"I know, I know."

"I know the issue doesn't come out for a while, but I don't know how to feel about coming out this way."

Kenji hums thoughtfully at that.

"I liked it." The other man admits.

"Yeah, I could tell from how much you were laughing."

"Hey, you were laughing too!" Kenji smiles. "Regardless of how this goes, only good can come of it. No one can accuse you of 'queerbaiting' or whatever." Ben rolls his eyes.

"I know. Also, people need to learn how to use that word correctly."

"Not gonna lie, I'm not actually sure what it means." Ben laughs for

the second time that day, though not as loudly as he did back in the interview.

“I know you’re new to all this, but you’re gonna have to learn these things if you’re gonna join the ‘community.’”

“Oooh, the community. You make it sound so exclusive.”

The rest of the ride is like this- the pair of them bantering back and forth. For some reason, traffic was light, and they’re at Ben’s house in no time. Before Kenji pulls up to the side, Ben directs him to the driveway.

“Are you free? Do you wanna… come inside?”

“Oh. Yeah, let's go.” Kenji says, his expression conveying he wasn't expecting the offer from Ben.

Ben doesn’t know why he’s okay with it. A few weeks ago, he was chastising Bumpy for thinking Ben would invite Kenji in, and now, he’s doing exactly that.

No part of Ben forgets what happened between them that drove Ben away to begin with, but… being around the other again, in this friendly capacity, reminds him of the good old days, and if he’s being honest, he’s been desperate for this kind of companionship again. He knows to guard his heart, but inviting a costar to hang out for a little while certainly won’t be a traumatizing experience.

Right?

Right.

"Wow, this is a hunk of junk." Kenji exclaims as Ben shows off his pride and joy- his converted camper van, taking up the spot of honor in his covered garage. Ben scowls at the comment.

"Excuse you, she's saved my life more times than I care to count. Late night shoots, no trailer, miles from home? She's got a bed and everything! I wouldn't drive anything else."

"Alright, I get it. Sorry." Kenji laughs. "First hiking, now this? You become more and more like Sean as time goes on, huh?"

Eventually, the pair make their way inside. Ben shows Kenji to the living room, before heading to the kitchen to grab them something to drink. When he comes back, Ben finds the other taking in his quaint little den.

“Do you not display anything from your work?” Kenji wonders as he takes a seat. Ben hands him a bottle of water then takes a seat next to the other.

“Only in the hallway. I have posters of things I’ve been in.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I dunno. I have a whole wall dedicated just to Camp Cretaceous, then a bunch of memorabilia from other stuff is littered throughout the penthouse.”

“I saw some of the stuff when I was there, though I didn’t see the CC wall.”

“It’s in my room.”

“Ah, that’s why. I *did* see your giant golden Sinoceratops head."

"That's Horatio." Kenji happily tells him. "He was a gift from Masrani after Teen Titans wrapped."

"And it's a dinosaur head because...?"

"You didn't watch the show? My character can turn into animals, but the Sinoceratops was his favorite. I think the writers thought it was funny because I was on CC." Ben grimaces.

"Sorry, I don't watch a lot of TV. Heck, I don't even watch the things I'm in unless I'm invited to the premier."

"Huh. I'm the opposite- I watch everything the Camp Fam has been in."

Camp Fam. It's been years since he's heard that term. Sammy's character on the show used to call them that, and it leaked into their own friend group. The now defunct group chat was literally called 'Camp Fam.' Kenji's confession makes him wonder- did he even watch Ben's stuff? He remembers the other talking about owning several copies of his magazine cover, but that can easily dismissed as friendly banter. Now, he has to wonder.

Saying none of this, Ben takes a swig of water.

“You know, you could come back to my place and go to my bedroom if you want.” Ben almost chokes on his water. “Whoa! What happened?” Kenji asks in concern.

“You want me to go to your room?” Ben wheezes out.

“Yeah, to see my CC shrine- oh. OH. Crap, I'm sorry. I didn-”

“No, no. It's fine. I’m the one who made it weird.”

Geez, idiot. Everything was going fine, and now you made things awkward. Great.

An uncomfortable silence sits between them now. As well as they’re getting along lately, spells of silence have also become increasingly frequent.

“We literally crossed that line years ago. Why are we like this?” Kenji laughs, though it is a bit strained.

This is the first time the other has ever brought up the fact that they used to be ‘more than co stars’ since they’ve reunited. If and when it was going to happen, Ben was sure he was going to be upset, but it’s in such a casual conversation that he just goes with it.

“Well, at least we won’t have problems when we get to the more intimate scenes.” Ben tacks on.

“I don’t know about that, Seanny.” Kenji teases. “Tim was right- you've never been in a romance film, and unless you’ve had secret relationships that no one knew about, I’m guessing your kissing game is a bit rusty.”

A bitter part of Ben wants to say, ‘the only secret relationship I had was with you.’ A mischievous part of Ben wants to say, ‘if you remember correctly, my kissing game was amazing.’ What Ben actually says is-

“Well, maybe we should practice then.”

…

What the hell did he just say???

Kenji just looks at him with a shocked expression on his face. It’s clear he wasn’t expecting that- honestly, neither was Ben. Still, he said it, so now he has to address it.

“I- Forget I said-”

“Okay.” Kenji replies.

“What?”

Suddenly, Kenji's hands are on either side of his face, holding him still. Ben doesn’t move, too stunned by what’s happening. When his face is close enough, Ben can see the outlines of contacts in Kenji’s eyes. The taller man soon closes his eyes and starts leaning in.

Ben can stop this. Despite his stature, he’s more than capable of pushing Kenji off of him. He’s done it before. If he really didn’t want to continue, he’d get up and they can laugh all this off and move on.

Ben doesn’t stop him.

Kenji's lips connect with his own, and the pair begin passionately making out. Soon enough, tongues are involved, and Kenji’s hands wander over his upper body. Ben does the same, running his hands over Kenji’s biceps, like he did when they used to do this years ago.

He knows this is meant to be practice, and that’s the context in which Kenji is doing this. That, or, Ben is delusional and they’re just actually making out. All too soon, Kenji pulls away, his face flushed and his eyes half lidded.

“I don’t think you need practice.” Kenji pants out, catching his breath.

“Maybe we should keep going, just to be safe?” Ben offers, equally out of breath.

“Yeah, okay.”

Once again, they’re all over each other.

Chapter End Notes

Soft Spot by keshi

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading!

Ayyy, they kissed. I think this is the fastest I had them do that in one of these longer fics.

Sorry again for the delays! At first, I delayed this chapter because I got busy, but then I got a bit sick and it's been hard to even work. I'm starting to feel better, so I was able to finish this! Hope it was worth the wait!

Gonna take time to draw the inserts and ending art for this and the previous chapter, so look for chapter 6 on Monday, 12/12!

Still Into You

Chapter Summary

Kenji is confused. Happy, but confused.

Chapter Notes

cw//suggestive, some strong language

Hello! I actually posted when I said I would lol

Hope you enjoy!

Kenji POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lips, as soft as he remembers. Cheeks, flushed as he caresses them. Eyes, blue and fluttering as he dives in for another kiss.

Kenji lies awake in his bed, his thoughts consumed with only one thing: **Ben.**

The flurry of kisses the two shared earlier are seared into his memory, and though it had been years since they've last done that, kissing him again felt as natural and comforting as slipping on a well-worn pair of shoes. Even in the years he and Ben were apart, there were times he dreamt of doing exactly what he did tonight- though, feelings of regret and guilt normally accompanied such thoughts.

He has no regrets about what happened last night.

At least, not until he summarily shown the door.

The two were all over each other, hands roaming, mouths and tongues restless as they give in to whatever is possessing them. Every time it felt like Ben was going to pull away, Kenji met his lips once more, and they started the dance all over again. Then, all too quickly, Ben finally pulled himself free, panting as he did.

‘That was... interesting. I don't think Claire has to worry about us being convincing when the camera rolls.’ The shorter man drawled, breathless. The concept of time had become meaningless, Kenji unsure if they were at it for hours or only a minute.

'I don't know what they're gonna rate it, but that certainly wasn't a PG-13 kiss.' Kenji joked.

'That's the point of practice, so we can do it perfectly for the real thing.'

‘Oh? We're still calling it 'practice'?' Kenji smirked. 'I think we can drop the pretense.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’ Ben insisted. His eyes looked at anywhere but Kenji's.

‘Sure, Seanny.' Kenji leaned in for another kiss, but this time, Ben moved away to avoid him.

'It's getting late. Maybe you should head home.' Confused, Kenji looked at the clock and saw he'd only been in here for twenty minutes.

'What do you mean? It's not even seven yet-’

‘I need to water my currant bushes before it gets too dark.’ the shorter man said dismissively. ‘You’ve been taking care of the one I gave you, right?’

Kenji, despite being confused by the nonchalance and not-at-all subtle change of topic, went along with it anyway.

‘Yeah, I’m following the instructions you sent me.’ Kenji replied, distracted.

‘Good. Great.’

Ben stood up and walked to the front door, leaving Kenji to obediently follow along behind. A thousand questions swirled in his mind, but he hadn't the courage or the sense to ask any of them.

When they got to the door, Kenji tried one more time to get another kiss in. Before he could so much as lean down, Ben opened the door and ushered him outside. All Kenji got was a quick 'Bye,' before the slab of mahogany is slammed in his face. He didn't move for a while, unsure of what just happened, until finally he walked the lonely path to his car and drove himself home.

He didn’t know what he was expecting when he went along with Ben’s ‘kissing practice’ idea. A part of him thought they’d both just laugh it off. Another part of him thought Ben would punch his lights out. Though, an annoyingly invasive part of him hoped it would maybe lead to something more, though what ‘more’ entails exactly, he doesn’t know.

It was like he was on autopilot, immediately grabbing the other’s face

and planting one on him. It was like they were teenagers again, and a flurry of hormone driven memories replayed in his head as he was making a new one to join them. Maybe it's because their height difference has lessened, maybe it's because they've both had practice in their years apart, but those were the most intense and passionate kisses they've ever shared, at least in Kenji's mind.

But it was over all too quickly, and once again they have nothing but a professional relationship between them. At least, that's the way Ben seemed to want to leave things, despite his disheveled look when he showed Kenji the door.

Kenji wishes he could do that- pretend it didn't happen and not get swept up in his emotions. After all, even if the shorter man hasn't said it explicitly, he must still hold a grudge over what happened between them years ago. He has no right to feel disappointed about any of this.

But then the memory of the other's lips on his comes back, their mutual desire and passion plain as can be, and Kenji knows forgetting it is a pipedream.

He needs to talk to someone about this. As he's never fully confided in anyone what happened between him and Ben, no one really pops into mind, but if he doesn't tell someone what happened, he's going to go insane. Surely he can vent about this without going into their past? They'd just have to know about him and Ben's beef AND that they had a past relationship.

A certain head of pink hair flashes in his mind, and he's already pressing her name in his speed dial.

--

“...and how he acted after, it seemed like he didn’t want to make a big deal out of it.” Kenji finishes. "So, yeah, what do you think?"

The voice on the other end hums thoughtfully.

“You know, I’m still on the part where you thought it'd be a good idea to call me, your ex, after 'accidentally' making out with Ben, your other ex.” Kenji would have laughed if he wasn’t, you know, freaking out.

“Brooklynn.” He says pleadingly.

“That’s my name.”

“C’mon, B. You *gotta* have some kind of advice for me.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Kenj. Do I think it's a bad idea to confront him about it? Yeah. Do I think what happened meant anything to him? Maybe, maybe not.”

“...this isn’t helpful.”

The girl sighs heavily through the receiver.

“Look, I don’t know the whole story about what happened between the two of you when we were younger, but I get that you called me

because I'm probably the only person who knows you two were even a thing to begin with. Despite how you've been acting towards each other the past few years, it's still obvious you guys care about each other."

Kenji grimaces. She had guessed herself they were once a couple years ago, and since then, he's only told her vague stories about why he and Ben weren't speaking, and that's even better than what he gave Darius. Still, she doesn't know the whole story, though he wouldn't put it past her to figure it out- not that he's going to help her with that, of course.

"You two are playing the romantic leads." She continues, "It isn't far-fetched that it *was* simply practice to him."

Kenji deflates a little, not liking the conclusion being drawn.

"But," She continues, "the fact that you keep thinking about it and need to call someone tells me it *did* mean something more, at least to you."

The inference startles him. Kenji would like nothing more than to deny it, that he's only thinking about it so much because of how confusing Ben was. He certainly isn't digging up lingering feelings and regarding a few kisses between them more than they are- a one time thing.

But then he'd be a liar.

Still, he doesn't want to unpack all of that right now.

“Maybe.” He admits noncommittally.

“And I support you, fully.” Brooklynn replies. “But… if he wants to keep things professional, it’s probably best to keep it that way. Getting involved with co-stars can be messy.”

“I thought we did okay.” Kenji pouts, referring to their own short-lived relationship. She laughs.

“Aw, same. Still, the last thing any of us want is a repeat of season four. Let him have the reins in this for a while and see where it goes.”

The mention of how the other boy was during season four has Kenji reliving some unpleasant memories. He shakes his head to recollect himself and takes her words to heart.

“I guess you’re right.” He relents.

“Of course I am. That’s why you called.”

The pair talk for a little while more- Brooklynn sharing some interesting stories from the set of the show she’s finishing up. When they hang up, Kenji goes over her advice for him over and over, ingraining them into his mind. He can't dive headfirst without considering everything. If he doesn’t, he’s afraid that they really will have a repeat of what happened between him and Ben all those years ago.

Despite this, his mind keeps reminding him of how much he loves kissing Ben, and Kenji falls asleep thinking of nothing else.

--

The first day of filming is finally here, and Kenji, for the first time in years, is nervous.

At this point in his life, he's used to a life on and off sets, long hours of wardrobe and makeup fawning over you and doing multiple takes for self-important directors. It's a job, like any other, and that's normally how he approaches his roles. He's won an Emmy and has been nominated for an Oscar twice, so clearly, his method works.

He's a consummate professional.

But this is the first time in years he's filming something with Ben Pincus opposite him, certainly the first where they're playing lovers, and suddenly he's a novice all over again. One might think working with him might make things easier since they've been co-stars before. But factors, like his and Ben's previous relationship, the fact this will be Kenji's first queer role after formally coming out, and that this is his first time working with notoriously fussy director Henry Wu, have him more on edge than anything else.

He showed up to the wrong makeup tent, almost tore his tailored jacket trying to get the thing on which earned him a steely glare from Jean, and nearly sent a gaffer flying as he ran into him because he was too busy looking around.

When he was finally ready (and in the right place) to film his first scene, he nearly lost all focus when he laid eyes on Ben. The other is dressed up in that outfit Jean shoved him in on fitting day, and damn it, he looks great. Kenji still reels at the fact the other is almost a whole head taller than him now. He still remembers how he felt when

the other would look up at him, his eyes big and doe like. He gets the same feeling when he looks at the now chiseled face of the same boy, all grown up. Both make his heart skip a beat

It's unfair how much Ben affects him. He wishes he could run over there and smooch his stupidly handsome face.

It is in that moment, with no pretext or outside influence, does Kenji realize something both wonderful and heartbreaking- **He never got over his feelings for Ben.**

He probably always knew, but shoved the feeling away, either out of frustration or guilt. Still, it seems no matter what he said all those years ago, no matter what he did after they ended what they had between them, in his heart he still carried a flame for the blue-eyed boy. To his shame, even when he and Brooklynn were 'serious.'

But now, that blue-eyed boy he knew is a man, and he's standing in front of him, the Los Angeles sun beaming down on him, and Kenji has to calm his heart and remind himself they're here to do their jobs.

For some reason, his revelations about Ben seem to happen when the other is standing opposite him on a set. The day he realized he might have feelings for Ben was just like today- just another day of filming.

-7 years ago-

Brooklynn sighs loudly for the fourth time in twenty minutes and

honestly, it's starting to get on Kenji's nerves. He gets it- he's also bored waiting around while the AD gets whatever it is that's supposed to be happening ready. Kenji, ignoring the girl, scrolls through his phone.

He checks the 'Camp Fam' group chat, seeing that no one has sent anything in hours. He switches to his convo with Ben, but the shorter teen hasn't replied to him in two days. Kenji frowns, though he chocks it up to the other being busy with another project. If nothing else, he's happy his friend is booked and busy. Of course, if he had it his way, he'd be here, keeping him company. Or, at the very least, replying to him.

They've finished, for the most part, filming all of episode five of Camp Cretaceous' second season. Ryan and Jenna were being chased by a big game hunter when someone is supposed to save them. They've gotten to the bit where Angus, the guy chasing them, gets knocked out, but they've been waiting around while they get the person who knocked him out ready.

"So, who do you think it is?" Brooklynn questions.

"From the way they're all hush-hush, it's gotta be someone from the movies." he tells her. "That would be nuts."

"Sure would. What's taking so long though?"

"Maybe makeup is taking forever?"

As soon as the words leave Kenji's mouth, a PA is calling for everyone to quiet down and for the two of them to reset.

“Finally!” Brooklynn cheers, perking up. Kenji joins her at their previous spot, but not before the makeup artist touches them a bit. Hap, the actor playing Angus, stands across from them, also getting a few final retouches. As soon as they’re gone, the clapperboard sounds, and Hap falls to the ground with a groan, and a figure is standing behind him.

The lighting really prevents them from seeing who it is, but Kenji knows immediately his guesses were wrong. The silhouette is too short for it to be someone like Owen or Zach. Not that their character's showing up makes sense, but the thought of a cameo excites him.

As he lingers on the shape, he finds there’s something oddly familiar about whoever it is.

Then they take a step forward into the light, and it’s clear as day who it is. The hair is all mussed up, the costume looks like it was run through a lawn mower, and he’s covered in fake mud, but the guy standing before him could only be one person.

“S-seanny?!” Kenji cries, seeing Ben standing in front of him. The nickname has become a term of endearment from Kenji, and he let it slip without thinking.

“No way…” Brooklynn whispers next to him in shock.

“What’s up? You’re acting like you’ve seen a ghost.” Ben, or rather, Sean, says cockily.

Kenji doesn’t know what overcame him, but in that moment, he forgot they were filming, and rushed over to where Ben is. The other drops the comically large stick he used to knock Angus out, and looks up at

Kenji with bright eyes.

"How? What even- When-"

Kenji shuts up and latches himself onto Ben, holding him tightly to his chest. After a moment, Ben returns the hug, his smaller hands gripping onto the back of his shirt. He's not sure why, but he's so overwhelmed, tears form in the corner of his eyes.

When he finally pulls back, he gets a good look at Ben, who's makeup and wardrobe update suggests Sean was put through hell. Suddenly, he wants to cry for real. But when his eyes meet Ben's, and the other smiles up at him shyly, Kenji can't help but smile in return.

"How?" He grits out, his voice more than a little wracked.

Ben, still smiling up at him, just shrugs.

Suddenly, Brooklynn is there beside him, and she and Ben hug as well. As soon as the two pull apart, the director yells 'cut' and Kenji all too suddenly remembers that they were filming.

"Shoot. Sorry I ruined the take." Kenji calls over, wiping at his eyes.

"Nono! That was exactly the reaction we were hoping for." Scott, the showrunner, says as he makes his presence known. The man normally doesn't show up for filming, but Kenji guesses he wanted to be here today because of the bombshell that was just dropped on them.

"We?" Kenji looks at Ben again. "You knew you were coming back? How long did you know?"

"Scott told me before season one ended. He wanted me to keep it a secret."

"And a good thing too." the man tacks on. "We wanted the most genuine reaction from you guys. We're gonna do the same thing with Darius and the others when we film tomorrow."

A flurry of emotions runs through Kenji at this revelation. His first instinct is to be upset- Ben essentially lied to them, to *him*, just for a scene. Not only that, it means Scott didn't trust them to be able to act well enough. The next thing he feels is pride- because of the deceit, they were able to pull off something incredible. Ben was able to keep this secret, not once giving away the fact he'd be returning. Kenji isn't sure he'd have been able to pull it off.

The one confusing feeling, however, is unbridled joy. Yeah, of course he's elated his friend is sticking around, but it's… more than that. As much as he'd hate to admit it, he's not sure he'd have such a raw, emotional reaction if any of the others were the ones who left and then came back.

Why that is, Kenji couldn't say. The only thing that it could possibly be is... nah, that can't be it.

The director calls it a day, and they all make their way to remove their makeup and change their clothes. He stops Ben before he gets too far.

"I'm so glad you're back, Seanny."

“I’m just glad you used that nickname, otherwise we’d have had to shoot it again.” Ben teases, laughing softly. Kenji loves hearing him laugh. That weird feeling in his chest stirs again, and it's becoming harder and harder to deny what it means.

Thankfully, the scene finishing means he's done for the day, so Kenji makes his way to his dressing room, though now with a spring in his step. The season is only part way done filming, but he can already tell that it’s gonna be a great one.

Now that they’re *all* together again.

Hopefully, he can keep that weird feeling in check for the rest of it.

The moment he steps into his dressing room, his mood takes a nosedive, as he’s greeted with the sight of his father standing in the middle, looking at him with a less-than-approving look.

He almost looks pissed, but why that is, Kenji doesn’t know.

What… What is this about…?

-present-

“Hey.” Ben greets Kenji as he walks up to him.

“Hey, yourself.” Kenji returns.

“Guess they wanted to get the street scenes done first. Logistics and all that.”

“It’s a good thing it’s not too hot today, or the makeup department would be having a fit.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not riding a bike in your solo scenes.” Ben bemoans.

“Just do it right the first time and you don't’ gotta worry.” Kenji teases.

The AD yells for quiet on set and Ben finds his mark. Kenji gets out of the shot and waits on his own mark. The clapperboard sounds and suddenly he and Ben shift into Louis and Peter respectively.

The scene takes place about two-thirds into the film, where Peter confronts Louis over lying about Brooklynn’s character, Charlotte. It’s rather genius that they’re filming this first, the natural awkwardness of this being their first scene together lends itself to the uncomfortable tension it’s supposed to have. But then, Ben always could play angry really well.

Peter hops off his bike, not caring where it fell to the pavement, and gets all up in Louis’ face.

"Whoa, Pete. What's-"

“You know, I may not have gone to some fancy school like you, but I ain’t as dumb as you think I am.”

“Geez, what are you talking about." Louis lowers his voice, getting in close with Peter as well. "And what the hell are you doing here? If someone sees you-”

“What? Someone like Charlotte?” The tone is accusatory.

“Yeah, as a matter of fact.” Louis says brazenly. Peter backs off a little, hurt clear in his expression.

“I can’t believe you.” Peter shakes his head. “I was hoping you’d deny it. I was hoping Eddie was wrong, that he- he misunderstood or something.”

Eddie, fyi, is Darius’ character. He’s Louis best friend and confidant, and he accidentally let slip that Louis and Charlotte hooked up and are supposedly going steady. This is news to Peter, who thought Louis was committed to him and him only.

“And what did Eddie tell you? Huh? What is it that’s got you all–”

“You messed around with her?” Peter cuts him off.

“What are you-”

“Don’t you dare try and deny it.” Peter cuts him off. “You sleep with her? Charlotte? You two get down and dirty in her fancy little house while her assemblyman father was at work?” The words have venom in them, and Ben delivers them expertly.

“I- I…” Is all Louis can say. “Eddie shouldn’t have told you.”

“So you admit it? You two really-”

“It has nothing to do with *you.* Why are you so mad?”

“Why?! Are you seriously asking me that right now?!”

“I never said we were exclusive, Pete.” Louis says nonchalantly. “And you knew from the beginning I thought she was cute.”

“So me and her are the same? What, you tell every person you fuck that you *love* them, then?”

“You better shut your goddamn mouth-” Louis gets in Peter’s space now, panicking about how loud he is and fearing someone he knows may be overhearing.

“Or what? You gonna beat me? Like your daddy beat you-” Louis, in fight or flight mode, takes a swing at Pete. Kenji is practically an expert at stage punches, and Ben falls right where he needs to.

Kenji is huffing, the emotions of the scene catching up to him as well. This whole scene reminds him of something that happened years ago, and though the details aren't all exactly the same, they're similar enough that Kenji feels those same feelings he did back then.

And he doesn't like that. It's nearly overwhelming.

Not to mention, the vitriol Ben was spewing as Peter didn't entirely come off as acting. Like he said, the situation in the film is similar to what happened to them, so he wonders if Ben was also caught in the moment like he was.

"Cut!" The voice of Henry Wu calls out.

Kenji, snapping out of it, is quick to pull Ben to his feet, and the other dusts himself off a bit.

"I forgot how good you are." Kenji whispers to the other.

"Same. Though, next time, pull your punch." Kenji smirks.

"I didn't make contact."

"I felt the air move from how close you got. If you connected, I'd have been knocked out for real."

"Wuss."

“Jerk.”

The pair laugh a little, but cease immediately when Wu walks up to them. The man is shorter than Kenji, but his perpetual frown makes him far more intimidating. His long hair is slicked back and the clothes he wears is a little too formal to be filming outside in.

Kenji has never worked with him before, but the man is notoriously difficult. He’s had actors redo scenes dozens of times, and he’s famous for wanting post-production reshoots. Needless to say, he’s afraid of what notes he’s going to have for them.

“That was excellent, gentlemen. We just need to do it once more for coverage, then we can move on.”

Oh. Sweet.

The day progresses much the same- a scene goes well and any second or third takes seem to only be for the sake of coverage. By the time they take a break, they’ve already filmed four scenes.

Instead of craft services, they have a food truck to serve them lunch today. After inhaling a couple fish tacos, Kenji wanders around a bit until he finds Ben eating alone, sitting on a traffic barrier. The solemn look on his face tells Kenji that, yes, he might have been thinking about the past as they were filming today.

He needs to distract him.

“What’d you end up getting?” Kenji questions as he takes a seat next to the other.

“Chicken. It’s not bad.” Ben replies with a full mouth. Kenji laughs.

“I can tell. Anyway, I think we only have one scene left. I’m pretty sure Darius is coming soon to shoot some afternoon scenes with me, so I still have a long day ahead of me.”

“Tell him I said hi. Assuming we finish in a timely manner, I’m supposed to meet Bumpy for dinner.”

“Oh my god, you still keep in touch?” Kenji asks, interested in hearing about the PA who worked on Camp Cretaceous. She and Ben became friends back then, and apparently, the two have maintained that friendship over the years.

“You kidding? She’s my best friend.” Ben says with annoyance, though the smile on his face gives away what he’s actually feeling. “We meet up in person pretty often, though most of the time we just talk on the phone.”

“Wow. Tell her I said hi, too.”

“She won’t remember you.” Ben teases.

They shoot the shit for a little while longer while Ben finishes his food. When he’s done, Kenji assumes they’d head to makeup and see if Wu is ready for the next scene, but instead, Ben drags him by the arm to behind one of the equipment trucks. Though he’s very much confused, he doesn’t stop him. The area is deserted since most people are still taking lunch or a break.

“What are we-”

Ben shuts him up by connecting their lips. Just like Kenji thought during that first meeting with Claire, since Ben shot up in height, it’s now easier for them to kiss like this. Though, now it's him who has to look up instead. Kenji is stunned. The first time this happened, he somewhat instigated it. Ben acted like it wasn’t a big deal, and they haven’t spoken of it since.

The voice of Brooklynn echoes in his mind- keep it professional. It’s obvious there’s something going on here, and letting Ben do this probably isn’t good for either of them. And, even if he confronted the other about it, he’d probably play the denial card again.

So, the right thing to do is to stop Ben.

Kenji doesn’t do that.

The other’s lips are so soft, and despite his earlier teasing, he’s also a great kisser. Kenji wonders if this is solely from their time together years ago or if he’s had lovers since then, but in either case, he finds his heart ache at the thought. He leans into the touch, and Ben lets out a happy sigh. Kenji would too, if he weren’t so confused. Then, Ben does that thing where he rubs Kenji’s ear softly, and he ends up sighing happily as well.

When they hear the faintest sound of someone nearby, they pull apart immediately, neither looking at one another.

Ben clears his throat.

“We aren’t filming any kissing scenes for a while. Need to make sure I’m not… rusty.”

Ah, so we’re back to that again.

“Right. Whatever you say, Seanny.”

“We need to head to make up.”

“Lead the way.”

They don’t hang out again during the next break. When Ben leaves for the day, he gives Kenji a quick wave and nothing else.

And if you’re wondering, Kenji does tell Darius that Ben said hi. He makes sure he doesn’t mention the fact they made out. It’s just as well- the other would probably tell him what Brooklynn did, and Kenji would feel guilty all over again.

--

By the time Kenji got home from filming, it’s already past midnight. The fussiness of Wu finally reared its ugly head when he was filming his individual scenes and the ones with Darius. It mostly had to do with the lighting from what he remembers, but he still ended up doing almost ten takes for one scene.

So yeah, he’s exhausted.

He thinks about taking a shower, but upon remembering he has nothing on his schedule for the day, decides to wait to do it in the morning. Heck, he's so tired, he wouldn't mind just falling asleep right there on his living room couch, despite knowing he'd regret it in the morning.

When he feels his eyes are too heavy to stay open, he pushes himself to get up and head to bed.

All he does is shed his clothes, leaving only his boxers, and slips under the covers.

He doesn't know long he gets to sleep, but he's startled awake by someone knocking on his bedroom door. Panic starts to set in.

Let Kenji remind you that his apartment has a feature where the elevator stops right in the apartment. It's convenient, especially when he goes grocery shopping, but one of the fears he had when buying the place was that some crazy fan was going to slip past security and invade his home.

When he hears the voice of Kelly, his agent, yelling at him to open up, he breathes a sigh of relief.

He opens the door for her and she barges her way in, looking very pissed.

"Do you have your phone on silent or something? Also, put some clothes on."

“Hi to you, too. I came straight home from the set.” He glances at his commemorative Camp Cretaceous clock that hangs on his wall, internally groaning at what time it is. “Like, three hours ago.”

A robe is being thrown at him and he barely has the reflexes to catch it. Rolling his eyes, he puts it on. Kelly picks up his pants and finds his cellphone. Shaking her head, she turns off silent mode then shoves the thing in his face.

What he’s seeing wakes him up.

“Ten th-thousand??”

“Twitter mentions, yup. And more than a dozen calls from me, no doubt.”

“That's way more than normal. It’s not my birthday or anything… why are people–”

Kelly groans, pulls out her own phone, and starts typing away. When she finally finds what she’s looking for, she shoves her phone in his face.

<Kenji and… Ben?!>

“What?” He grabs the phone and starts scrolling through the article.

The sensational language he could ignore, because all gossip rags are like that, but every word in the article makes his skin crawl. There are

some accusations being thrown around, almost all of them false. But the most damning thing, the thing that floors him, is the irrefutable picture of him and Ben behind that truck and the pair of them sharing a passionate kiss.

“Care to explain this?” Kelly asks, her patience wearing thin.

What can he say? Does he give her the bs answer of ‘we’re just practicing for our kissing scenes?’ Or does he give her the truth- that he doesn’t know what to make of their recent kissing activities, especially since, according to Ben, it doesn’t mean anything.

He’s not sure she’d like either answer, to be honest. So, he goes for the tried and true method of faking confidence and playing a part.

“What’s to explain? Besides, we look really good in this, despite it being taken by some scummy paps.”

He means it- the photo is actually really nice, and he makes a mental note to find the article on his phone later to save it himself.

He then spends the next hour getting an earful from his irate but loyal manager.

And through it all, all Kenji can worry about is how this is affecting Ben.

Chapter End Notes

Still Into You by Landon Austin (Orig. by Paramore)

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks so much for reading!

Things are going to get a little messier... just a warning lol

I didn't get a chance to draw like I wanted, so I'm going to push chapter 7 to Monday, 12/19! By then, I should have the comic inserts and ending art for the last three chapters done. Hopefully.
EDIT: Sorry about the delay! But, I've been so busy lately, I've barely any time to sleep, let alone write ;A;. I've managed maybe 1/3 of chapter 7, so I'm thinking that at the latest, I could post on Friday, 12/23. Again, sorry for the delay! I hope you check it out when it gets posted, tho!
EDIT 2: Very sorry again, but I'm extremely swamped with work and holiday prep ;A; I'm gonna try and finish the chapter by 12/29.

As an apology, here's the name and summary for Chapter 7: Movies (Movies by Conan Gray) - Ben's day was going great, until it wasn't. He's starring in a romance opposite Kenji! Why is everyone so surprised they were photographed kissing? Except, he *knows* the context of that photo, and honestly, he's mortified everything is unravelling before it began because he couldn't keep his lips to himself.

Almost Is Never Enough

Chapter Summary

Ben has to deal with the repercussions of kissing Kenji.

Chapter Notes

cw// mentions of child abuse, T-Rated kissing

Hello! I hope you enjoy!

Ben POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's crazy to think how quickly one's day can do a complete one-eighty.

Ben, for example, was having a pretty good day. The previous evening, he had dinner with Bumpy, which is always a good time. When he got home, he was able to relax for a while and went to bed at a perfectly normal hour.

When he got up this morning, he was feeling fantastic. He knew it was going to be an emotional day since he was filming his final scenes for 'Survival', but if nothing else, it made him more determined to finish strong. FC made his favorite breakfast- carob pancakes covered in berries, a side of sliced ham, and cold pressed juice. After the hearty meal, he headed to Dodgson studios, finding himself singing along to whatever saccharine pop song played on the radio.

Filming went as good as it possibly could have, with minimal takes and praise from the director. After he finished his last scene, the crew gave him a small bouquet and sent him off with applause. He nearly shed a tear from how moving it all was.

Then, he went off the lot.

Ben had decided to take a walk to Kirby's- keen on having lunch there, and then walk back to the studio and drive home afterwards. He didn't notice them at first- too occupied with how great the day was going and looking forward to another quiet evening- but all at once, a dozen or so people descended on poor, unsuspecting Ben.

Many of them were paparazzi, and many others just randos with camera phones. Regardless, they all crowded around Ben, effectively pinning him to his spot. The flashing lights going off all around were dizzying, and they seemed to be asking him different things. Or *yelling.* It depends on the person.

"Is it true you and Kenji are seeing one another?"

"Are you the reason KenLynn broke up?"

"Homewrecker!"

"I always knew you two had something going on!"

"When were you going to come out?"

All of these words melded together, until it was just a cacophony of noise that Ben could barely understand. What the hell happened that started all of this? Where did they all come from? How is it they know

about him and Kenji and… *whatever* the hell it is they have going on at the moment? And where the hell is the studio security?

Then Ben, in a moment of clarity, remembered details of the past twenty-four hours that he simply dismissed. A low murmur with lingering looks followed him throughout his dinner with Bumpy, though he chocked it up to celebrity recognition. When he got home, there was a car he didn't recognize was parked down the street. It's not like he lived in a gated community, so he didn't give it a second thought. The following morning, a few more cars joined the first, but since he was in a rush to get across town, it didn't linger in his mind. A few people were hanging around the studio gates when he arrived in the morning, but he thought it was because some A-List actor was coming in today.

Maybe the most damning thing he failed to recognize was the way the assistant who handed him his bouquet earlier looked at him- like she knew something she wasn't supposed to. He just thought she was getting emotional, like he was.

The blessing of not having a social media presence is that he isn't aware too much of what people think of him or what stories people come up with about him. He relies on trashy tv and what Mae tells him for that. Anything else seemed excessive and vain.

Now, he wishes he had literally anything. That way, he might have some clue as to what these people are crowing about. As it is, he's sure his phone is blowing up with several people trying to call him. He stupidly forgot it back in his car.

Then a photo, printed on shitty printer paper, was shoved in his face.

It's a scummy paps photo, watermark logo and all, but the main focus of it are unmistakable. Someone, apparently, had captured the exact

moment he kissed Kenji yesterday. Ben grabs the thing without thinking and stares at it intently.

“This is you, isn’t it? That’s clearly Kenji. What were the two of you doing, Ben?” Some paps smugly asked him, very much too close for comfort, all the while shoving a lav-mic and camera in his face.

This can’t be happening.

Ben pushes his way through the crowd, expertly maneuvering between people- an easy thing since he's six-foot-five. Though, they didn’t make it easy for him. He headed back into the studio, with security finally showing up and holding everyone off at the gate. It's not until he's in the safety of his van that he wasn't breathing, and all at once he heaves, trying to catch his breath. He takes a moment to regain any kind of composure. A soft buzzing is going off in his console storage, but he ignores it. He can't... deal with this. Not right now.

He still has the picture in his hands. The sight of it makes him want to rip it to shreds and set it ablaze. This was *supposed* to be a private moment. Though, that's foolish of him to assume he'd have any kind of privacy considering his profession. Instead of taking his anger out on the photo, he shoves the thing into the glove box, takes a sideways glance at the bouquet he was given earlier, and drives off the lot.

He's grateful he took the van today, considering no one reacted to it. The best disguise works again. Still, he takes care not to accidentally run over any of the people at the gate, but as soon as he’s free, he's speeding away. Ben almost takes the cutoff to head home, but decides against it. Those cars he didn’t recognize could be paps as well, and for all he knows, there will be even more of them.

So where does he go? He can’t even go home.

A stray thought comes to the forefront of his mind- go to Kenji's. He knows where it is now and the building is secure. As far as he knows, the other man's new residence isn't public knowledge. Though, it would be just his luck that some random person sees him and puts two and two together. Besides, why would he go *there?* Why did his brain think that was his best option?

For a while, Ben kind of just drives aimlessly, taking random cutoffs and onramps, and heading down side streets with no real idea of where to go.

It isn't until he pulls up to a familiar house does he realize that, yes, his heart always knows where to go when he's in trouble and needs someone to listen. He can't believe he drove here purely on instinct.

He pulls on his commemorative 'Survival' hat, keeps his head low, and walks up to the front door. He doesn't get more than two knocks in before it swings open and he's being ushered inside.

"You harp on me for not answering my phone but you pick today of all days *not* to answer yours?!" The gruff and familiar voice of Bumpy scolds him, though she does so as she's leading him to her couch where he can get more comfortable. "I was calling to suggest you hide out here for a bit, but it looks like you came here on your own."

Man... He can always count on Bumpy. Even when she's mad at him, she's always there to help.

"Ben?" She asks softly, her arm on his back. "You wanna tell me what happened?"

Ben shakes his head. She doesn't chastise him.

"You want me to call Mae?"

He shakes his head again.

"Do you want to just sit here for a little while?"

Instead of a reply, he just maneuvers himself so he is closer to her. Picking up on exactly what he wants, she hugs him and holds him there, saying nothing. Her house is quiet- no sound can be heard except the dinosaur-themed clock on the wall ticking away. He rests his head on her shoulder, and just sighs.

Today was supposed to be a great day. It *was* a great day. Then... shit, he could cry with how stressed he is, and so suddenly. But, he's done that too many times to Bumpy- too many times has she been his literal shoulder to cry on. He likes to think he's been there for her as much as she has been for him, but then, he'd be a liar. Not because he's a bad friend or whatever- at least, he hopes he isn't- but because so much crap has happened to him in the last several years it just happens more often. If he spent the rest of his life making it up to her, it would never be enough.

And today, he just added another thing to make up for later.

--

"Ben! Why don't you answer your phone?!" Mae crows as she's let into Bumpy's house.

The writer did end up calling his manager after he calmed down. As soon as she's close enough, the older woman pulls him in for a hug. The second she separates from him, however, she's frowning again.

"I have been swamped with calls all morning. I was on the way to your house when I remembered you were at Dodgson. By the time I got to the studio, they said you finished and had left, but not after getting mobbed." Mae recounts, rubbing her temples as she does. "We may need to look into getting you a regular driver and maybe a bodyguard. Heck, maybe we should even get you a personal lawyer."

"What? Wait-"

"That seems a little excessive, doesn't it? Once all this dies down, you won't really need the whole entourage." Bumpy interrupts, bringing a cup of tea to Mae, who takes it gratefully.

"Not to be immodest, but Ben's popularity has been on the rise. It might be a good investment getting people we trust now rather than potentially running into glory chasers down the road."

"True enough. Besides, from what I saw, not all the press is bad."

"I've seen that as well. Many of the more lgbt friendly sites are certainly spinning this positively. At the very least, it seems a lot of the bigger names are keeping their headlines neutral."

"It's a shame you guys only just started filming. If the film were announced already, you could throw together a quick presser. Ben in front of a camera right away might just stave off something worse."

“Not a bad idea, but knowing some of those 'fans,' it could very well make things worse. I was thinking that we could-”

“Someone called me a homewrecker.” Ben deadpans, piping in on this conversation the two are having about him. “That I lured Kenji away from Brooklynn and broke them up.”

“I’ll kick their ass.” Bumpy responds immediately, a hint of genuine anger in her voice. “You shouldn’t have to hear that from strangers who don’t know shit.”

“I’m an actor. My private life is apparently up for speculation.” Ben drones on, having to say it to himself more than once in his career. Bumpy doesn’t look any happier with that answer, but she doesn’t say anything more.

“Ben, I’m not going to pry and ask what that photo is about.” Mae starts, speaking carefully. “But you’re right- people are naturally interested in your life. And, this is certainly something buzzworthy.”

“We’re literally playing a couple in the movie. Why are they so surprised we kissed on set?”

“The studio wanted to keep the whole thing mum until filming was at least partially finished. We only just started filming.”

“What about that magazine interview?”

“The new ML issue doesn’t come out for a few more weeks, so no one

that doesn't already know would have any idea about the film, or your sexuality for that matter. All people know is that you and Kenji kissed and there's a photo to prove it."

"Besides, that photo clearly wasn't taken during filming." Bumpy says, probably louder than she meant it to be. Still, she's right. He can't really explain it away. Heck, he can't even explain why he did it in the first place.

As of late, he's just wanted to kiss Kenji, and… the guy lets him. He isn't hoping to rekindle what they once had- and he shouldn't. It's just, when he sees that unfairly attractive face- smiling at him, laughing with him, singing a stupid song with him- he can't help but want to kiss the man it's attached to.

He should have had more restraint. Maybe then, he wouldn't even be in this mess.

That, or, be honest with himself.

"Since we can't bury it," He starts. "What *do* we do?"

Mae sits there for a moment, wracking her brain. She normally has some kind of plan of action, and the fact that she doesn't have an immediate answer worries him. She takes a last swig of her tea and pulls out her phone.

"I have an idea, but we're going to have to get the others involved."

"You mean-"

"The whole Fam." She confirms.

Oh. This is going to suck, isn't it?

--

Ben and Mae ended up crashing at Bumpy's place for the night, the pair sharing the living room. Mae had made her calls the previous evening and their guests are due to arrive soon.

"We couldn't have just told them over the phone?" Ben gripes, really not wanting to have this meeting.

"It's better we're all on the same page, so we need everyone here in person."

"We don't have to get into the nitty-gritty, just make sure everyone knows the plan going forward and if they're on board." Bumpy assures him, though the words do little to calm his nerves.

Over the course of an hour, five others join them in Bumpy's home- the all too familiar faces of his co-stars and friends.

Every time someone arrived, they took the time to greet Bumpy and catch up with her. She's known them since their time on CC and only Ben has been keeping regular contact with her. The last to arrive- Kenji- even made sure to bring something for her.

“I know you’ve probably been living here a while already, but… here.” He hands over a wrapped gift, to which Bumpy gratefully takes. Inside are CC themed dinnerware, gaudy and most certainly out of place in most homes. Where he got it, Ben has no clue, but Bumpy seems happy with the ‘housewarming gift’ all the same.

“Thanks, Ry.”

They eventually settle into Bumpy’s increasingly crowded living room, with Mae and Bumpy choosing to stand so everyone else can be seated. Kenji, like at Kirby's, slots himself right next to Ben on a tiny sofa. Ben doesn’t protest.

Mae clears her throat and starts explaining.

“I know this isn’t the best of circumstances to be having this little reunion.”

“We’ve been having these a lot lately.” Yaz points out. “Though, it’s nice we have Bumpy here too.”

“I’m just glad our schedules allowed this.” Brooklynn sighs. “Me and Kenji have a few scenes to shoot after lunch, and I’m pretty sure Yaz and Sammy have some scenes at the studio to shoot as well.”

“Yeah, but that isn’t until this evening. I had a lunch date planned, but it’s easy enough to reschedule.” Sammy explains. Yaz, next to her, rolls her eyes for some reason.

“I did a good chunk of my scenes yesterday already.” Darius chimes in. “I don’t have anything on my schedule for the next couple of days,

actually.”

“Okay, good. At least we have a few hours, but I don’t think we’ll be taking that long.” Mae continues. “So, you’re probably wondering why–”

“You guys finally got caught, huh?” Yaz interrupts, directing her question at both Ben and Kenji.

“W-what do you mean ‘finally?’” Ben sputters. Next to him, Kenji doesn’t react.

“C’mon, really Ben?” Yaz tuts. “We never knew for sure, but we all thought you guys had a *thing* going on back on the Camp Cretaceous set.”

"I knew, but only because Kenji pretty much told me after we started going out." Brooklynn points out. "It was kind of obvious you guys were super close- like, *closer* than close."

Sammy and Darius don't say anything, but their expressions pretty much mirror the other two.

No. No way.

*There was no way **any** of them knew. They were so careful, even when things got bad between them- the others just thinking they had a falling out. Ben never said a word to anyone other than Bumpy, and she certainly never told anyone. But apparently, for all their efforts, the others still picked up on what was going on...?*

Ben instinctively glances at Kenji. The other is just sitting there calmly, but his eyes are fixed on Ben. He's not meeting his gaze, though his line of sight seems focused on watching him. His expression is almost serene, despite the frankly upsetting revelation that was just shared.

The last time he felt Kenji's gaze on him like this was a long time ago.

-six years ago-

Filming for season three of Camp Cretaceous is finally underway, and Ben couldn't be happier. Season two was a success, so they were renewed, again, for another two seasons. That means all together there will be five seasons, which also means five seasons worth of memories and experiences he'll have with his best friends.

It also means he has a little more time to spend with Kenji.

While Ben would say all six of them have become close since the start of the show, he feels he's been in the taller boy's company the most. Though, that way of describing Kenji may become obsolete soon. Puberty has been coming at Ben full force, and the only thing that hasn't been affected is his voice. The others keep telling him he'll one day be massive, but he doubts it. Still, he's already taller than everyone but Kenji, and he's already at the guy's chin.

Anyway, he's developed a... *crush* on Kenji. It's not like his feelings

developed suddenly or anything. As time went on, Kenji just became part of his life more and more, to the point where even when he's working on other things or has a day off, Ben hears from him anyway. He's been there for him and seems happy to be around him. It's natural that he started to feel something for the guy.

But he can't act on it. He shouldn't. Kenji isn't… *like* him. He's seen the way the other looks at girls. He's seen him look at their co-stars at times, especially Brooklynn. There's even rumors of their characters developing a relationship next season (though to most, the natural choice for Jenna is obviously Paul)

What Ben is trying to say is he doesn't have a chance, and it would be a bad idea anyway.

Kenji is one of his closest friends. He shouldn't be throwing that away because he gets a little flushed when he's around him.

So he hides it, as well as he can.

It's just… hard. Well, *harder*, lately.

For whatever reason, Kenji seems determined to spend as much time as possible with him. He's not sure when it started, but as of late, he hasn't had a moment alone while on set. During breaks, rehearsals, and everything in between, Kenji has been there. Scenes where he isn't even sharing with Kenji has the taller teen lingering on set nearby. Heck, Kenji came over to his apartment (though he didn't get permission), and he only left when his bodyguard figured out where he was and picked him up.

And then there's the staring. If Kenji isn't near him, he's watching him, and as much as Ben likes the attention, it can get a little much at

times.

Confronting him might seem the obvious choice, but that presents the same problem as confessing his feelings- potentially driving the guy away. While he can rely on the others, Kenji is generally the one he talks to about his problems. So who does Ben turn to when the problem concerns Kenji?

Turns out, it's the staff. Well, sort of. There's this PA on set that's always been kind to him. She fetches things without him needing to ask, treats him if he gets a cut or bruise or something, and always stays on set until everyone else leaves.

For whatever reason, everyone calls her 'Bumpy', probably because of her size and almost clumsy demeanor, so that's what he goes with.

She's such a reliable person. Maybe he can rely on her about this, too.

One day, during a break in filming, he manages to avoid Kenji and everyone else and finds Bumpy. The girl, he finds out, is 19 and working here as pretty much an unpaid intern. Experience in the business, in any capacity, looks good on a resume- or so she says.

When he asked if he could bend her ear, she was more than happy to accept. They find a place near crafty to sit and chat, though not so close others might hear them. She in turn seemed to have things she wanted to get off her chest as well.

"I'm a PA, not a slave! I mean, I don't mind getting people coffee, but they didn't even give me money to fetch it! Do you know how much it cost me?" The girl harps, her face getting redder due to frustration or just not breathing while she rants.

“Uh, a lot?” Ben guesses.

“Ohohoho, way more than *a lot.* I had to skip a few meals to make up for the dent it caused. The worst part is they didn’t even thank me.”

“Why do you do it then? I’m sure there’s actual paying jobs for what you do.”

“Trust me, there really aren’t. I was lucky to even get this. ‘Paid in experience.’ Psh. At least I’m getting my foot in the door.”

“Oh. Do you want to be a director or something?”

“Maybe? Honestly, I like the idea of developing a story more than filming it. Maybe a screenwriter or something. Gosh, that sounds like a dream, but then, you’re not as involved in the 'making of' part of it, you know?”

“That’s so cool.” Ben praises. “I’m not exactly the most creative person. Like, I don’t think I’d do well at improv or anything. So, you write stories and scripts?”

“Well, I’ve been working on one… but it’s not that good.”

“I’d love to read it one day.”

“Psh. You don’t have to say that.”

“No really! I would.” Ben insists. Bumpy smiles at that.

“Thanks, Seanny.” He smiles at her use of the nickname. “Oh, heck. I’ve been talking your ear off. What was it you wanted to talk about?”

Ben laughs at how quickly she changed topics, then proceeds to explain as well as he can about what’s been going on between him and Kenji, including his feelings about everything. He doesn't mention the taller boy's name, using 'Mike' as a cover, and he worries she's going to figure it out regardless. He must sound like a child, whining about liking a boy and not knowing what to do. Bumpy, however, listens intently, and never makes him feel silly for talking about this.

“And that’s about it. I just don’t get why he’s staring at me all the time. Maybe… he’s grossed out. I did come out to him, after all. Ugh, maybe he can tell I have feelings for him.”

“If he was grossed out, he wouldn’t be hanging around you so much.” Bumpy points out. “You know, don’t take this to heart, but it kind of sounds like he might have feelings for you too.”

What.

“Nah.” Ben forces himself to laugh. “He’s straight. I’ve seen him check girls out before.”

“And how does that normally go?”

“He doesn’t get dates, if that’s what you're asking.”

“No no, I mean, how does he look? Like, what does Kenji showing interest in someone look like?”

“Well, he kind of stares at them, and he tries to get their attention and-”

Oh.

OH.

“Ben?” Bumpy asks, knowingly.

“It’s just a coincidence.”

“Sure.”

“He’s straight.” He reiterates, mostly to himself.

“Sure.” Bumpy repeats.

They sit there in silence for a bit. After a while, Bumpy clears her throat and stands up.

“We should really head back. You… gonna be okay?” She asks, with both concern and amusement in her voice.

“Yeah, yeah.” He says distractedly. “Thanks for talking with me.”

“I should be thanking you. The other PAs aren’t that friendly. They think they’re above me because they’re getting paid, so it was nice to have someone listen.”

“Anytime.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” She smiles. “See ya later, Seanny.”

“See ya.”

For the rest of the filming that day, Ben could only think of the implications of his conversation with Bumpy. It’s a good thing he isn’t filming anything with Kenji today, or the weird feeling in his chest might affect his performance, not to mention give away that something is up to Kenji.

Though, he should point out that, as per usual, the taller teen is nearby anyway. And once again, Ben can feel his eyes on him.

“Hey, makeup! Too much blush on Sean!” The AD calls, and Ben’s face flushes even more.

When filming finally finished for the day, Kenji came up to him, much to his delight and dismay.

“Great job, Ben.” Once again, Ben’s face starts heating up.

“Thanks, Kenj.”

“Say, can we talk? There’s… something I wanna talk to you about.”

Oh, what fresh hell is this?

‘…it kind of sounds like he has feelings for you too.’

Way to get my hopes up, Bumpy.

“Um, I think my mom-”

“She’s talking with Hawkes. They’re getting coffee, so we'd have to wait anyway.” Kenji informs him. Well, damn. Ben ran out of excuses real quick. “C’mon, Seanny. Just… for a little bit.” Kenji has this kind of weird look in his eye, like he’s itching to say something.

Oh. Maybe it’s something he really needs help with. Or, maybe it’s something he’s wanted to get off his chest and doesn’t have anyone to talk to. Ben knows the feeling all too well. He’s been relying on Kenji this whole time, it’s only fair that he returns the favor.

“Sure. Uh, what did-”

“C’mon, let’s go somewhere private.” Without another word, Kenji grabs Ben by the wrist and leads him away. Ben’s first instinct would be to free himself, the act certainly catching him off guard. But, the warmth of the larger hand on him, paired with the strange behavior from Kenji has Ben just going with it.

They end up in that same secluded corner where they run lines sometimes. He even finds some candy wrappers they probably left last time they used it. It’s kind of become their spot.

Ben shoos away such a sentimental thought.

“You think we’re far enough away?” Ben teases. Kenji doesn’t laugh, and Ben’s nerves can’t seem to settle.

Kenji takes a seat on the ground, his back against the wall. Taking this as a cue, Ben joins him. Neither say a word for what feels like minutes.

“So… what’s on your mind?” Ben prompts him.

Kenji gulps, and he looks at him nervously.

“It’s my dad.”

“What about him?”

Another pause, and a moment of silence passes again. Then, Kenji finds his voice.

“I don’t know who else to talk to about this. I can’t tell any of the bodyguards, cuz they work for him. The same goes for my manager and my tutors. I’m not sure about telling any of the others, either. But… I think I can tell you.”

Oh, this is something serious. Ben’s heart rate is picking up and his stomach is in knots.

“You can tell me anything.”

“But you *can’t* tell anyone. Okay? I just… wanted someone to know. Just wanna get it off my chest.”

The snapping fingers. The disapproving looks. Kenji always wanting to visit and stay over. These may very well be isolated incidents, but to even Ben and his limited experience with these things, he can easily see where this is going.

“Kenji… is he–”

“Promise me. Please, Seanny.” The taller teen looks him in the eye, pleading with him to just do what he’s asking.

Ben doesn't know what to think about all this, unsure he wants to burden the knowledge that Kenji is about to share. He chastises himself for such a selfish thought. Suddenly, all he can focus on is the fact that his friend is asking for his help and to keep a secret. Kenji is already doing something very similar for Ben.

“I promise. I won’t say anything.”

Kenji seems to relax, but the frown on his face doesn’t go away.

“Okay. Thanks.”

“So… what *about* your dad?” Kenji turns away from him and focuses on his hands before he speaks.

“He… hit me the other day.”

“What?!” Ben yells. Kenji shushes him.

“C’mon, keep it down! I don’t want someone coming over here.”

“Sorry. I- What?” He repeats, softer, still in disbelief.

“He, um, isn’t doing too well with his company. That’s why the ‘summer house’ we all went to wasn’t really up to par. He wasn’t paying for the upkeep. And recently, a deal he was working on for a while fell through. He hasn't said anything, but I know he mostly relies on me now and the money I make from all my gigs to keep us going.”

Damn, talk about pressure. No wonder he was so jaded about the whole 'parents handling their money' thing.

“Okay, but, what does that have to do with-”

“He’s stressed. He's been getting angrier more often, and he… yells at me sometimes.”

“He takes it out on you?”

“Just verbally. Well, I mean, until recently. And it's only sometimes! It's just- that was the first time he ever… did *that.”*

“Kenji, if it's one time or a hundred, it doesn't matter. You have to tell someone-”

“No!” Kenji cries, and it's Ben's turn to shush him. “I’m telling you he only did it once, and the yelling and stuff is just... Look, I'm already risking everything by telling *you.”*

“What are you risking? If he’s abusing you-”

“Don’t use that word.” Kenji warns. Ben huffs at the response.

“Kenji, what he’s doing isn’t right.”

“I know, I know. But, it’s not like I’m a model son or anything.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“You don’t understand.” Kenji sighs in frustration. Honestly, Ben could do the same.

“No, I don’t.”

Kenji glances at him and his eyes seem to soften. He's since folded his arms and pulled his knees closer to his chest, but he's still sitting right next to him.

“I’m just like you, Ben." Kenji starts. "One parent. My mom died when I was little, so he’s all the family I have left. If… if I get separated from him, if he gets arrested or whatever, I’d have no one. And if he doesn't, and he found out I said something... I'm afraid he'll get worse. I talk a lot about wanting to be independent but if I lose him, then who do I have left?”

Me, Ben thinks. *And the others.* They may not have known each other for that long, but Ben knows he isn’t the only one who thinks of the six of them as a family. Kenji is an important part of that family and he shouldn't be going through this.

He just worries that if he pushes that idea too far, at least in the state Kenji is in now, he might be pushing Kenji further into his father’s tight grasp. He knows the other is under his thumb. The first time Ben met them, Daniel (Kenji’s Dad) did this thing where he’d snap and Kenji would pay attention, more like a trained dog than anything.

Or, maybe, pushing the idea is the right thing to do. Kenji should know there are people who care about him and won’t hurt him the way his father has. He should be insisting that he has family (and options) besides his dad and should report him. But this is all so overwhelming to process. He’s fifteen, damn it. How is he supposed to know how to deal with this? How is he supposed to keep this a secret?

But as hard as it is for Ben to have to contend with all this, it must be a hundred times worse for Kenji to actually be going through.

“Okay. I get it." Kenji visibly relaxes at this. "I still think you should tell someone,” Kenji looks like he’s about to protest, but Ben continues. “But I'll keep my promise. I’m glad you trust me enough to tell me.”

“And you won’t say anything, right?”

Ben wants to break that promise more than anything. Kenji is such a caring and sweet guy- he doesn’t deserve what his father is doing. But, he did make a promise, and despite every fiber in his being telling him to break it, he won’t.

“I won’t. But Kenji,” Ben starts, “He lays a hand on you again, and I’ll fight him myself.”

Ben just said the first thing that came to mind. If it ever did come to blows, he’s not sure how that would go, but he’s just so incensed by all this, he feels he can do anything if it means protecting Kenji. He just hopes such strong words don't anger the taller teen.

Then Kenji laughs. Genuinely, boisterously, laughs.

“I’d pay good money to see that.” Kenji wheezes out.

The sight is a departure from the sullen demeanor the taller teen had moments ago, and that alone has Ben smiling himself.

When things go quiet again, Ben sits there wondering if he's supposed to say anything. He wants to be there for the other, wants to assure him he'll always be there, but he just doesn't know how to go about doing that.

Once again, Kenji speaks up.

"I don't know what I'd do without you. You're always here when I need you, Seanny." He says this so softly- softer than Ben has ever heard him. In an instant, Ben's worries about not being a good enough friend are assuaged.

"I'll be here whenever you need me." He knows that's really dramatic and probably cringe, but he means it. Even if he didn't have feelings for the guy, he really is one of his best friends, and he wants him to be happy.

"I know. Me too." The corners of his eyes start to water, and Ben instinctively reaches out to wipe at them. The act has Kenji smiling all over again.

Suddenly, Kenji is looking at him as he has the past few days. And, even more suddenly, his face is getting closer. Kenji's hand finds his, the heat of it both pleasant and scalding.

"What-" Is all Ben can get out before a pair of chapped lips are being pushed against his own.

WHATWHATWHATWHATWHAT.

It lasts all of a second before Kenji is pulling away, a look of panic on his face.

"I- I'm sorry, I just-"

Ben closes the distance again, shutting him up.

It's just as awkward the second time, but Ben doesn't care. He's *actually* kissing his crush right now, after said crush kissed him *first*. Kenji hesitates to do much more than let Ben have control, but all at once, he relaxes, and he's pressing against his lips as well.

As far as kisses go, it's not that great. It's all teeth clinking and both of them have chapped lips right now. The angle is awkward and his neck is starting to hurt.

But since it's their first (and second) kiss, it's perfect in Ben's eyes.

A small part of him thinks this is a bad idea. Sure, Kenji kissed him first, but he was in a very emotional state. This seems like he's taking advantage of him a little. But then, would Kenji have just kissed anyone he happened to have that conversation with? Ben doesn't think so.

He finally pulls away, and Kenji has a dazed look in his eyes.

"I like you." Ben confesses. "Since before the Florida trip."

Kenji, eyes still glossed over, smiles goofily at him.

“Huh. I think I like you too.”

“You *think?”* Ben laughs.

“I do, I do. I just… Before I met you, I don’t think I ever thought about kissing another dude before.”

“Was I okay for your first *‘dude’?”* Ben emphasizes the word, amusement in his voice.

“You’re my first, period.”

Oh, wow. He took Kenji’s first kiss. Well, technically, Kenji took his first, but that’s not the point.

“Well, since we already kissed, and we like each other-”

“We got the order wrong, huh?” Kenji laughs.

“Doesn’t matter. So, uh, does this mean we’re…?”

“Oh. Uh, like, dating?” Kenji asks, with a bit of confusion in his voice.

Ben’s heart sinks a bit. He should have expected this. Smiling ruefully, Ben averts his gaze from Kenji. *It was just a kiss or two. It doesn’t have to mean anything or be more than it is,* Ben reasons in his head. He

slides his hand out from under Kenji's, feeling colder without it. Kenji immediately picks up on his change in demeanor and backtracks, recapturing his hand in his own.

"I *want* to date! I do!" He cries, mirth in his voice. "It's just... can we, uh, keep it a secret?"

So far, Ben has been on an emotional rollercoaster. His emotions are high, and they keep fluctuating between happy and confused and hurt and angry. Right now, though, he's able to see reason. His kneejerk reaction might have been to be upset at the request, but it doesn't take long to realize it makes sense and isn't unreasonable.

"Okay." Is all he says, regaining a bit of his pep.

Ben isn't adverse to the idea, since he knows it probably stems from wanting to keep his father in the dark. Thinking about it more, it's kind of thrilling- having a secret, on-set romance. Still, a tiny voice in the back of his mind doesn't like it- a voice of doubt and insecurity worming its way forward. He chooses to ignore it.

"Great." Kenji sighs. His hand slips from Ben's and slips it around his back, holding him. Ben won't admit it aloud, but he really likes the feeling of Kenji's much larger hand holding his- almost as much as he likes being held by him. Ben glances at the taller teen, a hopeful look in his eyes.

"So, since we're away from everyone still, can we maybe kiss again?" Kenji laughs at that.

"Whatever you want, Seanny."

-present-

‘-we all thought you guys had something going on back on the Camp Cretaceous set.’

Once again, Kenji’s gaze is fixed on Ben, and he doesn’t know what the taller man is thinking. Last time it was like this, it was because he wanted to share a secret with him (well, two if we’re getting technical). Still, whatever it’s about, Ben isn’t sure he’ll like it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ben denies, hoping Yaz accepts his answer. “We all know it was Brooklynn and Kenji that had something.” The stuntwoman looks like she’s about to protest, but Sammy holds her back. Brooklynn, whose name was just mentioned, also looks like she wants to say something but ends up not saying anything.

“Well, in any case, it’s what's going on *now* that matters.” Mae interjects, trying to get them back on track. “In order to put these rumors to rest, I think all six of you should do an interview together.”

“All of us?” Sammy asks. “Shouldn’t it just be Ben and Kenji? Or even the two of ‘em with Brooklynn?”

“Also, wouldn’t a big interview like that ruin the studio’s marketing push? Yeah, the focus is the love story, but a big draw is certainly the CC reunion aspect.” Darius points out.

“Having just the two or three of them do it means acknowledging the rumor as the truth, or at least some people might interpret it that way.” Mae answers. “I already spoke to Masrani and Claire last night, and both are okay with the interview. I talked with all your managers as well. We all agree it would be best to do damage control now rather than riding the wave and possibly scrapping the project later.”

A chill runs down Ben's spine. They might... scrap the project? Because of Ben and his moment of stupidity and weakness, all the hard work they’ve done so far, all the excitement everyone here had at being together again- poof! Gone, just like that? In all his years of acting, he’s only ever worked on one project that got shelved. It was a pilot for a horror anthology, and while it was silly and bound to not last long, he was proud of his work as Carnival Clown. Despite it never taking off, he does have a small poster of the never-aired show in his hallway of fame.

But this is different. *‘In The Stars’* is the kind of project he’s wanted to work on since he was a teenager. This has been a dream so far. Reuniting with his CC castmates again, working with Deering and Wu- all of it. But… it all might end sooner than any of them thought.

This is all Ben's fault. This is just like the last two seasons of Camp Cretaceous all over again, except worse. They at least were able to finish the show. They might not finish the movie.

“I’m sorry.” Ben grits out, his chest heavy with guilt. “We’re going through this cuz of me. I shouldn’t have done it. It’s all my fault.”

“No it isn’t.” Kenji replies right away. “No way.”

“Yeah, Ben. If all it takes is a kiss for the movie to be in danger, the

studio doesn't really have faith in the project." Brooklynn points out.

"And they do. They want this to succeed as much as we do." Mae says.

"Besides, it takes two to kiss. If you're to blame, then so is Kenji." Yaz jokes, which earns her a chastising tut from Sammy.

"What she means is, this is a group effort, and we'll stick together and get through this." The Texan encourages him.

"I'm sure the position you're in isn't easy, Ben. I know you're going to be getting the brunt of the flak, and that can't be easy. But you should know by now- we won't leave you. None of us blame you for what's happening." Darius, the most eloquent of them, assures him.

They were like this back then, too. Well, except Kenji. But that's not the point.

They're all here for each other- they're here for him.

Ben doesn't know what's happening until he's suddenly standing in a bathroom alone with Kenji, having been dragged here by the other man, and the door locked behind them. He stands there, dazed. When he gets his wits about him, he practically gawks at the other, who only stares at him like he has been all morning.

"What? Why did you-"

"You were crying. I… I don't know. I thought maybe you wouldn't

want them to see."

Ben swipes at his eyes, and finds his sleeve wet. Holy crap. He didn't even realize.

"We didn't have to hide. Kind of embarrassing, but they've seen me cry before." Ben wipes the rest of them away. He smiles, touched that Kenji was at least considering his feelings. "Thanks, though."

He turns to leave, but once again, Kenji's hand holds his wrist, effectively stopping him. Ben turns to ask what's wrong, but instead, he's suddenly face to face with Kenji, the other stepping forward and crowding him.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know, Ben. What *are* we doing?" He asks, genuine questioning in his voice. "This whole thing between us right now is confusing. I know it's only been a couple of times, and you use the whole 'practice' thing as an excuse… but I just really want to kiss you right now."

Ben does too. He's been using the excuse to have these moments with Kenji as of late, but that's only so he doesn't have to be honest with himself about what he wants. He'd love to kiss Kenji, wherever and whenever he wants. He's always wanted that.

*He never **stopped** wanting that, even after what happened.*

But that's why he excused it all as 'practice.' How can he want to rekindle what he had with the person who ended it in the first place? If Ben had any self respect, he'd never have suggested they kiss, even

with the excuse.

Besides, getting caught kissing Kenji is what landed them in this awkward mess to begin with. He really shouldn't be encouraging this.

But when it comes to Kenji, Ben is always weak. The man is literally his weakness.

“I want that too.” Ben replies, faster than his brain can comprehend the answer.

In an instant, Kenji stops holding back and they’re making out in Bumpy’s bathroom. It’s cramped and the door handle is digging into his side, but he can’t find it in him to care. The passion that Kenji is putting into the kiss is literally breathtaking, and Ben does all he can to keep up with the frantic pace the other is setting. He thought it before, behind the trailer, but being the taller one in this dynamic really changes the experience of kissing. It's so different- the angle, the rhythm, the energy. But what remains constant is the feeling of the other against him, as it was all those years ago, and it feels like coming home after a long day.

When they finally pull apart for air, Kenji smirks.

“You’ve gotten really good at kissing.” He tells Ben.

“I know.” Ben pants out.

“Heh. An ex-boyfriend teach you how?” Kenji starts kissing his neck, never putting on enough pressure to leave a mark.

“You taught me how. Never been with anyone but you.” Ben admits. "Well, there was one night I sorta made out with a guy, but that was it." This stops Kenji in his tracks. He pulls away and looks at him, a sad look in his eyes.

“No one?”

“Hey, that’s only slightly worse than you, okay? You were with Brooklynn this whole time.” Ben sighs, hoping they can kiss some more.

Kenji rests his head on his shoulder, his own shoulders a bit sullen. Ben isn’t sure what that was about until he snaps his head back up and looks at him dead in the eyes.

“We weren’t together. At least, not for as long as the media thinks we were.”

“...what?”

“It lasted barely two months. She and I decided to lie to keep up appearances. It wasn’t lonely or anything, but yeah, no one else for me too.” Ben, still trying to process the revelation Kenji just bestowed upon him, has enough wits about him to reply.

“Don’t think about it too much.” Kenji smiles at that.

“Can I kiss you some more?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“What… *are* we?”

Kenji doesn’t answer for a second. He makes sure he’s looking Ben in the eyes again when he finally does.

“Whatever you want.”

Hmm. A big change from the last time Ben asked him that. Still, as much as he’d like to fully lean into this, now that he has permission, he isn’t sure it’s best to go at it full throttle. At least, not while the public eye is on them like this.

“I... honestly, I don't know." Ben admits. "Can we just go slow and see where it takes us?”

“I can do that.” Kenji starts peppering his face with kisses, earning him a giggle from Ben.

“We just have to hide better.”

“Hey, we were pretty good at that when we were teenagers. Just no more kissing behind a truck in the middle of the day anymore.”

“Haha. Jerk.” Ben deadpans.

“You like it.” Kenji laughs.

And he does.

Despite knowing better, despite all those wonderful and awful memories resurfacing, at war within his mind and soul, he just accepts that this is how things are- that this is how he wants it to be. Ben just hopes this won’t turn out as horrible as it did last time.

--

When they finally emerge from the bathroom, everyone seems to watch them with knowing smiles. The moment they take their seats, Brooklynn speaks up.

“So, while you two were making out, we decided on a date for the interview.”

The undignified groan Ben lets out is only drowned out by his friends' laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Almost Is Never Enough by Ethan Hodges (Orig. by Ariana Grande)

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading!

I'm not at all experience with writing scenes of people talking about abuse, so I'm sorry if it seems forced or not right. I'll continue to learn o7

Sorry that updating took so long! Then again, this is also the longest chapter so far lol

Going forward, I'm not going to set specific dates for updates anymore, and just post when I finish a chapter. I might leave an update in the previous chapter's notes that it's going to happen soon, but otherwise, no timeframe will be set. That way, people don't check on the date I set and not find an update. (And so I'm not feeling pressured to use all my limited freetime worrying about finishing and using it to actually finish when I can ;A;)

That said, I hope to finish the whole fic by the end of February lol Hope you continue to enjoy the fic! And Happy New Year!

EDIT: Sorry I was on such a long break! I'll explain more in the notes of the next chapter, which I'm planning on uploading Monday, 1/23! Thanks for your patience!

EDIT2: I completely forgot it was Lunar New Year, which means I was busy with my parents all weekend. I'm gonna push the upload to Wednesday, 1/25. Sorry again!

Just Like a Movie

Chapter Summary

Kenji makes up for lost time.

Chapter Notes

CW// implied nsfw (still T rated)

Hello! Thanks for waiting for this chapter! Hope you enjoy!

Kenji POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kenji groans softly as he opens his eyes, his internal clock waking him early even on his days off. Ugh, he would have loved sleeping in. His work schedule for the next couple of days is nonexistent, with filming not resuming for him until the weekend. Ben only has today off, but this serendipitous alignment of their free-time means they can finally hang out off set.

As such, he has a few fun things planned for him and his boyfriend.

His use of the word 'boyfriend' may be a bit premature, honestly. They only *recently* decided that they'd be 'more than friends' and it was with the understanding that there wouldn't be any pressure to label it or make it more than it is. Just go with what feels right and have some fun.

Well, he's certainly been having fun with Ben lately, in more ways than one. Last night especially…

Kenji turns on his side and sighs in content as he takes in the view: Ben sleeping peacefully next to him, his hair tousled and looking cute

as a button. The only thing leaving Ben with a sense of modesty is Kenji's blanket, their clothes discarded on his bedroom floor. After an eventful night, it's no wonder the guy is passed out.

This isn't the first time they've fooled around, but that's only if you count a couple of messy and awkward encounters in bathrooms when they were teenagers. Last night was certainly the furthest they've ever gone.

Kenji doesn't kiss and tell.

Careful not to wake Ben, he slips out of bed, shimmies his underwear on, then heads to the kitchen to start some coffee.

It's been two weeks since the photo of them kissing on set spread like wildfire online, and though Mae was able to do moderate damage control with the early announcement and reveal, there are still people who angrily tweet at him or Ben. Mostly Ben, for whatever stupid reason. They're celebrities (as immodest as that may sound) so they should expect this kind of treatment once in a while, but still- it's taxing and he's more than over it.

He pours himself a cup of coffee and sighs as he takes his first sip. Coffee was never something he enjoyed before Brooklynn, but after spending years being around her, he's picked up her bad habits. The difference between them is still great- the girl can down espresso like it's water- but nowadays, he can't go a day without at least one cup of the stuff.

Kenji wonders if Ben drinks coffee. That's just another thing he's going to have to learn about the other, added to the list of things he has to relearn since they've been apart.

He stands there in his kitchen, bare but for his boxers, and thinks how lucky he is to finally have Ben back in his life. As he sips his coffee, he thinks of all the years they could have spent together, the life they could have had together. He doesn't regret the time he spent with Brooklynn, despite it being as friends for most of it, but he can't help but feel a pang of regret for letting things end up the way they have.

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe all that matters is that here and now, they have something again.

The fact they have to hide their relationship is nothing new- they had done that the first time around. Besides the glaringly obvious exception, they've done well in keeping a lid on everything. Sure, it means they spend time at his penthouse more than anywhere, but they've gone out a few times. Finding somewhere where no one will recognize them is difficult, but the lack of further 'sightings' of them proves their efforts are not in vain.

Kenji has never had a 'normal' relationship, now that he thinks about it. With Ben the first time, they hid as much as possible. With Brooklynn, they did go out publicly, but in the safety of their home, they were nothing more than friends. Now, he's back with Ben, and once again, they're hiding.

Not wanting to get too into his head, he turns on his speaker and puts on a random playlist. The song that plays is upbeat and bouncy, and before he knows it, Kenji is dancing alone in his kitchen.

"What are you doing?" A familiar voice asks. Kenji turns to find Ben coolly leaning against the wall, smirk on his face. The other is wearing his shirt. Despite being taller than Kenji, the garment is baggy on Ben, since he's not quite as bulked up as him. He's not wearing any pants, and as far as Kenji can tell, he might not even be wearing underwear.

“Good morning, babe.” Kenji smiles, still shaking his rump to the beat.

“It sure looks like it.” Ben makes his way over to the counter. Before he can offer the other a cup of joe, Ben wraps his arms around him, swaying himself along with Kenji movements. It's very subtle, but when they move a little quickly, Ben's face twists into a wince.

“Are you sore anywhere?”

“Nnnmmm.”

“Is that a *no?”*

"Ehhh."

"Cuz if your back hurts, I got-"

"I'm fine. I just need to stretch before we fool around again." Ben groans, removing his arms from Kenji's midsection to stretch exaggeratedly, groaning as he does.

'Again' he says. Kenji knows it's silly, but hearing that Ben even wants a next time raises his mood even more.

"You smell like coffee." Ben observes.

“Want a cup?”

“Mmm.”

After hooking Ben up with a cup of java, the pair move to Kenji’s dining room table. Unfortunately, they didn't bring the music with them, though Kenji made sure he danced his way out of the kitchen. After Ben takes his first sip, his whole complexion seems to change almost magically. He was wide awake earlier, but now, the other seems more like his normal self. He makes a mental note that *yes,* Ben does indeed like coffee.

This whole scene is so domestic and Kenji cannot contain the smile threatening to surface.

“Whatchu grinning about?” Ben asks.

“Oh, nothing. Thinking about what we're gonna do later. Got a fun day planned for us, babe.”

Ben smiles, but after a moment, his smile turns almost sad.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s, uh… Don’t worry about it.” He says dismissively. Kenji ain't having none of that.

“C'mon... You can tell me.”

“Well, it’s just- You’ve been calling me that a lot lately.”

“What? *Babe?"* Ben nods in confirmation. "Do you not like it?”

“I *do…”* Ben admits, though his tone suggests he has more to say.

“But?” Kenji prompts before reaching for his mug.

“Is that what you called Brooklynn when you guys dated?”

The question catches him off guard and he almost chokes on his coffee. Ben immediately hands him a napkin and looks at him apologetically. Perhaps sensing the shift in mood, Ben backtracks.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter. I just- I don’t–”

“Nope.” Kenji croaks out. He clears his throat before continuing. “I uh-called her ‘Bwookie Bear’.”

Ben doesn't say anything to that, and Kenji is unsure the other even heard him. But when he hears the barely stifled laughter coming from the other, followed by a guffaw and rauccous laughter, he knows the taller man definitely heard him.

“Shut up, I’m not good with nicknames, okay?” Kenji huffs, downing the rest of his coffee. Ben calms down before he responds.

"You two did baby-talk? I never would have imagined. What'd she call

you, Kenji-Wenji?" Kenji just rolls his eyes, slightly offput by the fact the other was able to so easily guess Brooklynn's petname for him. Ben takes his silence as confirmation and laughs to himself.

"Haha. Well, if you're not into nicknames, then-"

“I didn’t say that." Ben clarifies, no longer laughing. "I really like being called ‘babe’ by you.”

"Oh yeah? Not too simple? Don't wanna be Benny Boo or something." Kenji teases.

"No way. Call me that and I'm throwing myself off a train." Ben jokes, earning him a laugh from Kenji. "When we were younger, you used to call me 'Seanny,' which was okay. You still call me that. But back then, I used to hope you would give me a nickname like 'babe.'" Ben shuts his eyes and shakes his head. The sudden reaction peaks Kenji's interest.

Instead of continuing- probably realizing how adorable cringey the confession he almost made was- Ben also downs the rest of his cup and marches back into the kitchen. Kenji swears his face was cherry red before he disappeared behind his saloon-style doors.

By the time Kenji joins Ben in there, the other has already washed his cup and is drying it off. He *could* be a nuisance and make him finish that little confession, but instead, Kenji takes pity on him. He wraps his arms around Ben's midsection just like Ben did to him earlier, and rests his head on Ben's shoulder. The other doesn’t stop wiping the mug, though at this point, it’s clearly dry already.

“Babe?” Kenji sings, right into Ben’s ear.

“You’re gonna be *insufferable* now, huh?” Ben deadpans. Without looking, he takes the cup from Kenji's hands and washes it.

“Aww, you’re embarrassed, *huh,* babe?”

“Don't bother me while I'm washing *your* dishes, jerk.”

“That gonna be *my* pet name, babe?”

“Why? You like it?” Ben teases back. Kenji smiles and kisses Ben on the cheek, earning him a laugh. He's glad Ben isn't actually upset. “Alright, get off me. I gotta get ready so we can do that ‘totally awesome thing you have planned.’”

Kenji checks his the clock on the wall and hums thoughtfully. They don’t have to be at the place for another few hours, and even if there’s traffic, he can’t imagine them being late.

“We got a little time. You maybe… wanna…?” The suggestive tone in Kenji’s voice isn’t lost on Ben, if the way he tenses in his arms is anything to go by. Ben, bless him, seems to think about it, but he wriggles free all the same.

“Maybe tonight. Depends on how ‘totally awesome’ your plans are.” Ben teases, a sway in his step as he walks away.

Before he can get too far, Kenji flips up the back of the shirt, and Ben yelps in surprise as he scurries off back to Kenji’s room.

And like Kenji suspected, the other wasn't wearing anything underneath.

--

Ben's eyes dart around at an alarming pace as the two walk through the cinema lobby. He's like this every time they go out in public together. If Kenji weren't genuinely concerned for him, he might find the six-foot-five Ben cowering a little funny. He *could* try and get the other to calm down, since they have perfectly normal 'disguises' on and the place is deserted, but he knows by now all that will earn him is a paranoid shushing.

"Why is there no one but the employees here?" Ben whispers harshly- which is hilarious to Kenji, since Ben just said no one is here.

"It *is* a weekday…" Kenji replies coyly.

"Sure, but there should be *someone* here. An elderly couple, some teenagers skipping school- *Anyone!"*

"Babe, I'm surprised you're not happy. There's no one around to take pics of us."

"I just don't get it. Something's up." He suddenly looks up at Kenji in concern. "You don't think a swarm of paps are gonna come out of nowhere, do you?"

Sighing, Kenji smiles fondly before stopping Ben in his tracks. He

hates that the photo incident has made him so jumpy, but after the way the press hounded him, he can't say he blames the guy. He takes one of Ben's hands in his own, fully catching his attention.

"I was hoping to keep this a surprise, but I rented out the whole cinema. No one to see us here, and we get a whole theater for ourselves." Ben blinks up at him blankly, absorbing his words.

"Oh. Okay, now it makes sense." Ben sounds relieved, and Kenji can't help but laugh at the complete turnabout. "Wait- The *whole* cinema?"

"Just for the matinees. We just gotta get out of here by three."

"You didn't have to do through all that trouble…" Ben chides, but the smile on his face says he appreciates the gesture.

Kenji squeezes his hand and leads him to the concession stand, which already has the set he ordered ahead of time ready. He and Ben take their snacks and head to the ticket-taker who simply smiles and tells them to head into theater two.

"I know you said we were gonna watch a movie," Ben starts with a mouthful of popcorn. They sit smackdab in the middle of the theater, no one around to interrupt their conversation. "And I appreciate all your effort to make this special. But which movie are we watching exactly?"

"You'll see." Kenji replies cryptically. He stretches his arm on the back of Ben's seat and settles in. The lights dim, right on cue, and the movie begins to play.

The second the opening credits start playing, Ben gasps. He can feel the shorter man's eyes on him without looking his way.

"You did *not."* Ben says in disbelief.

"I had to, babe."

-six years ago-

Kenji had no idea dating a guy would be so similar to dating a girl. Granted, he has no basis of comparison other than roles he's played or what he's seen on television, but he gets the impression what he and Ben have is similar. You know, minus the whole 'keep it all a secret' part.

Ben, to his credit, has been good about playing it close to the chest. In the two months since they got together, the closest they've been to getting caught together was when Kenji snuck them to the parking lot to get a quick make out sesh in. One of the PAs stepped outside for a smoke break and almost caught them, but Ben was quick to hide and make it seem like Kenji was out there alone.

He knows asking the other to keep everything under wraps has affected him. There are times when they're hanging out and getting a little friendly that Kenji will detach himself from him when someone passes by to make it seem innocent. Every time it happens, he catches the other with the saddest smile on his face.

He *hates* seeing that smile. But, he's so afraid of anyone finding out- of his *dad* finding out- that he knows he's going to be seeing that smile for some time.

Another thing he's found out about Ben in their time together is how observant the other is. He can be a bit socially constipated at times, but maybe it's that fact that allows him to notice things about others that most people wouldn't. Like, even though he's never explicitly told Ben when his father had another… *moment,* he could tell from how Kenji was acting that he wasn't in the best of moods. He always makes sure to distract him and to make him laugh as much as possible on those days.

Kenji knows he's probably not giving back as much as he's receiving. He feels bad about it every time he and Ben meet in some dark corner, their rendezvous lasting ten minutes- if they're lucky. It would take *a lot* to make up for it.

That's why he has a super special date planned for them- one where they can be as close and couple-y as they want: A movie! They're gonna have to be incognito to get into the cinema, but once they settle in, they're home free. It's dark and everyone there would be busy watching the film to pay them any attention. That, and, Kenji knows for a fact the place is gonna be practically deserted- the movie he chose has been out for a while, it's weekday matinee, and the cinema isn't in a busy neighborhood.

Yeah, he knows a simple date isn't exactly equivalent to what Ben has been doing, but this is the best he could think of. Besides, when he told Ben of his plan, the other seemed really happy. And if Ben is happy, so is Kenji.

Then the day they're supposed to watch the movie comes and things don't exactly go as planned...

Ben: *Wait, it's a* horror *movie??*

Kenji: *Yeah, but it's PG-13. It can't be* that *scary :P*

Ben: *I don't do too well with horror…*

Kenji: *I'll be there with you! If you get scared, you can hang onto me :))*

Ben: *I see, so* that's *your plan lol*

Kenji: *I promise it'll be fun, Seanny <3*

Ben: *fine, fine :/ I can't complain since you already got the tickets*

Kenji: *Meet you there soon ;)*

Kenji pockets his phone, smiling to himself as he does. Ben is totally right in assuming Kenji has ulterior motives in picking a scary flick, and he's totally looking forward to the shorter boy latching onto him in fright, but the fact he's agreeing to go means he doesn't really mind. Score.

Normally, if he needs to go somewhere, he'd tell one of his dad's bodyguards, but as he wants this date to be a secret, he'll just sneak out of the house and take the bus. Of course, that's easier said than

done.

He manages to dodge them by going through the kitchen and dining room, barely avoiding Hawkes who's scrounging around the fridge. Kenji even makes it all the way to the entrance without being seen, but as he's putting on his shoes, a familiar voice speaks up from behind him and catches him off guard.

"Kenji? Are you going out?"

The voice is unmistakably his dad's. He didn't even know he was home. Normally, the man is at work by now. Kenji turns around, a sheepish expression on his face.

"Hey, Dad. Uh, yeah I am."

"Oh? Where to? And why aren't one of the guards with you?" He asks, tone suspicious.

Shoot.

"Uh, it's nearby. Well, kind of. I was…" Gotta make up something quick, something believable. "I was going to meet Brooklynn for some coffee at a cafe!" He says quickly, the pink haired girl popping into his mind for some reason. Well, Ben was the first thing person to pop into his mind, but he knows better than to mention the other boy.

"Just you two? Son, are you… going on a date?" He asks knowingly. The second the word leaves his dad's mouth, a sense of panic settles in Kenji. The man's tone suggests he likes the idea, and Kenji isn't sure if he wants to laugh or cry at that.

“C’mon dad. It’s just coffee.”

“My son, going on his first date. Ah, I remember the first date I took your mother on.” The man gushes, and Kenji really wants to get out of here.

“Dad, it’s not like that. Look, I’m gonna be late, so lemme-”

“Oh! I can drive you.”

Oh, no. The one time the guy wants to do something nice for him, it's the one time he doesn't want him anywhere near him.

“That’s really not necessary. It’s not that far, so I was just gonna-”

“Nonsense. Let me drop you off.” The man is already reaching for his keys. Kenji, still panicking, stands up and puts his hands up defensively. The act startles his dad, who looks at him confused.

“Really.” He insists. “You don’t need to bother. I’m good.”

His dad’s smile drops immediately. If he didn’t know better, he’d think the guy was… hurt. He averts his gaze for a second, sighs deeply, then looks Kenji square in the eyes.

“Look, Kenji… I… I know I’ve been hard on you lately. Things haven’t been going great at work, but I took that out on *you.* I’m sorry.”

Oh.

He… he actually apologized. If Kenji is being honest, he never thought the man would ever do that. Not just to him- to *anyone,* really.

Kenji is truly happy that his dad seems remorseful about his abnormal behavior towards him. Normally, he's just like this- his normal dad who sometimes pesters him. Sure, he isn't home a lot and has some high expectations of Kenji, but he was never horrible. That *uglier* side of him only came out recently, and though it's become more frequent, it simply isn't the norm. Hearing the man apologize makes him feel better about everything- if only on the most surface of levels.

He just wonders if the last time really *was* the last time or if he'll be hearing another apology like this again in the future.

"I know." Kenji says softly. "I get it."

"I know this isn't much of an apology, but can I just… do this for you? Drive you to your da- Coffee meetup?"

Well, Kenji can't just say no to that, now can he?

"Sure, Dad."

Kenji was able to text Brooklynn and send her directions to a cafe near the theater he's supposed to meet Ben at, all within the ride of the elevator down to the parking garage. To his relief, the girl agreed. She was even able to get there before him somehow.

The second his dad's car pulled up to the cafe, a head of pink hair was smiling and waving at them.

"Hmm. I can see why you like her. She's cute." His dad comments. Kenji groans.

"Dad…"

"Alright. You got your hat and glasses? Oh, do you need me to pick you up?"

"I got my 'disguise,' don't worry. And nope on the ride. I don't know how long I'll be, so I'll just get a rideshare back."

"Okay, just be safe."

"I will. Thanks dad. See ya." He gets out and closes the door. His dad doesn't leave until he sees him put on his 'incognito' hat and shades and the two of them head inside. The second he's out of sight, Kenji sighs in a mixture of relief and lingering stress.

"So, you gonna tell me why I had to rush here?" Brooklynn asks, her voice amused. "You're lucky I was at a nearby electronics store. If I was at home, I would have told you no."

“Sorry. Thanks, by the way.”

“I’m still waiting for an answer.” She tells him smartly.

Shoot. He didn’t think this far ahead. Of *course* the girl wants an reason for her presence here, and she deserves one. Still, he can’t exactly tell her *why,* at least not without outing himself and Ben. It doesn't help that he gets the feeling that if he’s at all vague about it, she’ll keep pestering him until she gets her answer.

A half-truth it is, then.

“I just wanted him to get off my back. He’s been weird lately, so I wanted to get out. He caught me sneaking out, so I needed an excuse.”

Her jovial mood dips at his explanation, her smile no longer as wide. Still, she nods in understanding, her gaze now on the menu.

“Not gonna lie, I was kinda hoping it was because you wanted to hang out with me. Glad to help, though.”

Ah, heck. Now he feels worse.

“Well, it’s not like I *don’t* want to hang out with you. Sorry for... uh, using you. God, that sounds bad.” His voice is strained as he tries to explain. The girl takes pity on him and smiles as she did before.

“It's alright. Well, since we’re here, can we order? Maybe catch up for a bit?”

Oh, he’s definitely running late for his plans with Ben. He should tell her no, maybe even take a raincheck, but he’d hate for to see her smile falter again because of him.

Maybe he can be *a little* late…

“Sure, sounds good.” He tells her. As they get in line, Kenji makes sure to shoot Ben a text.

Kenji: *Sorry, I’m running late ;A; I promise to pay you back, but can you get tickets for the next showing instead? I’ll get there as soon as possible.*

He doesn’t have to wait long for a response.

Ben: *np :P just don’t leave me waiting too long, k?*

Kenji’s heart swells with affection. Ben is always so accommodating, if not a little high-strung. The feeling is replaced with something unpleasant when he realizes he *lied* to him so he can have a quick coffee with Brooklynn before their date.

“Here. I ordered something sweet for you.” Brooklynn is suddenly next to him, two drinks in hand.

Kenji, caught off guard, haphazardly shoves his phone in his back pocket and takes his drink gratefully.

“Thanks. Uh, how much-”

“I got it. Don’t worry.” She winks at him, her voice soft.

“Oh. Thanks.” He’s not sure why, but he can feel his cheeks heat up at that.

“C’mon, let's find a table.”

The two take a seat by the window, the morning sun nice in the somewhat chilly cafe. Normally, Kenji would be worried about people recognizing him that he'd avoid sitting next to windows. He at least has his 'disguise' but he can't really relax since he has the very recognizable Brooklynn sitting across from him, hair out and everything. The last thing he needs is someone posting an out of context photo of the pair of them and starting a crazy dating rumor.

There's no way he'd be able to explain it to Ben.

The guilt he feels about keeping Ben waiting starts to weigh on his mind even more, but he doesn’t want to rush Brooklynn since he practically begged her to be here. So, to distract himself, he strikes up a conversation.

Turns out, she’s surprisingly easy to talk to. He’s talked to her before, of course, but not on this kind of personal level. Listening to her talk, he realizes that they’ve both had somewhat similar childhoods- growing up in the industry and having enormous pressure to be

perfect.

He’s also never realized that yeah, she is pretty cute. He always thought she was attractive- he’s not blind, y'know. But now that Kenji knows her better- as a person and not as a celebrity- he realizes that she’s a great person. She's wise beyond her years and has a story for almost every situation. He might be wrong, but there's almost a loneliness to her. He gets the distinct feeling that, as much as she loves her work, she'd give it up if things got too hard.

He doesn't want to analyze why, especially since he has Ben, but he feels a kind of kinship with her. If he were more honest, he'd say it was an attraction.

Since he started going out with Ben, he’s been wondering what he is- gay, straight, or whatever. He has feelings for Ben and finds him attractive, so he’s definitely not straight, but… talking with Brooklynn, he realizes he’s probably not gay. So… Bi? Pan? Ugh, he doesn’t know.

What he *does* know is that, for an entirely different reason now, he’s feeling guilty towards Ben again.

“So that’s why I refuse to ever go surfing ever again. One shark encounter was enough, thanks.” The pair laugh. Kenji notes how easy it is to be around her, adding to his increasing list of things he likes about the pink-haired girl. A quiet part of him thinks, 'if I were to date her, we wouldn't have to hide...' He immediately shoos away the intrusive thought, not liking the implication.

“Wow. So, your parents just let you go on those filming sites alone?” He says, continuing their conversation.

“Well, *legally,* no. But my Dad has to travel between the states and London for work pretty often, and my Papa runs a VFX shop. They’re both busy pretty much all the time. On shoots they can’t attend, I have a handler.”

“Huh. Kind of like me.” A detail that initially went over his head suddenly comes to the forefront of his mind. “Wait. You- You have *two* dads?”

“Yeah. I never mentioned that before?”

“Did you? Maybe. Huh.”

“It’s pretty common actually. Besides, this is Hollywood, you know?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to imply it was weird. Just– I wouldn’t have guessed.”

So, Brooklynn is most likely chill with LGBTQ+ people, what with having two dads. He doesn’t know why, but he feels even more comfortable around her. He’s not sure he wants to share with her about his burgeoning sexuality crises, but it’s nice to know she would be okay with him coming out to her.

“So, what is that your dad-”

“Excuse me, young man?” A female voice behind him says. He turns around and is face to face with an elderly woman. He glances down at her hands and sees she’s holding out his phone to him. “Is this yours? It was on the ground behind you.”

“Oh, shoot. Thank you so much ma’am.” He takes it from her and smiles as she leaves. He moves to put the thing on the table and finish his question.

Then the screen lights up and he nearly chokes when he sees the time.

He’s been here for well over an hour. The movie started twenty minutes ago.

“Oh no.” He says under his breath. He scrolls through his notifications and sees he missed five calls from Ben and a number of text messages.

Ben: *You get lost or something? :P*

Ben: *Sitting here is pretty lonely ;(*

Ben: *Hey, the showtime is soon. You nearby?*

Ben: *Kenji?*

Ben: *Is your phone off??*

Ben: *The movie is starting…*

Ben: *Why aren’t you answering your phone?*

Ben: *Are you okay? Kenji??*

“Kenji? You’re looking a bit pale. What’s up?” Brooklynn asks in concern.

Kenji is out of his seat in an instant.

“I’m so sorry. I gotta go. I'll catch up with you later, yeah?” In seconds he’s out the door.

The cinema is a few blocks down and he runs there as quick as he can. He almost gets hit by a car as he crosses the road without looking, and he doesn’t look back as the driver yells at him. When he gets to the cinema, Ben isn’t waiting outside. *Maybe he went inside?*

“Hey, excuse me?” He asks the box office employee. “Did a brown-haired teenage boy get two tickets for ‘Lights Out?’”

“Yes? Why?”

“Did he leave a ticket for me?”

“No, he bought the tickets, but he waited out here for a while.”

“Oh. Did he go in?”

“Nope, he left a few minutes ago.”

Crap. That’s what he was afraid of.

“Thanks.” is all he says before he leaves to look around the area.

If he left a few minutes ago, it’s entirely possible he’s still nearby. That's his hope, at least. As he searches, he calls Ben’s phone. It rings, so at least he knows it’s on, but every single call, it goes to voicemail at the end. Why isn’t he picking up?

Of course he isn’t answering your calls. You stood him up, idiot.

But he was concerned I was hurt or lost! He would definitely pick up if he were okay. It doesn’t make sense!

As he looks around some more, he finally catches a break: He sees a familiar head of floofy brown hair standing on a street corner. He calls out to him, but he doesn’t turn. Kenji runs to catch up with the other, but before he can even get close, a car (that he recognizes as Ben’s mom’s car) drives up and the brunette gets in.

“Ben!”

The car drives off, much too fast for Kenji to catch up to.

Kenji feels like crap- he lied to Ben about why he was late, missed the movie date entirely, and unknowingly ghosted him too. He couldn't even catch up to him when he *did* find him. Though, if he had, would

he have explained what he was doing? Or would he lie again?

But at least he knows he went home, safely. At least he knows Ben isn't in some alleyway, feeling crummy because of how Kenji treated him.

The question remains, though- why wasn't he answering Kenji's calls?

He'll worry about that later. All Kenji can hope to do for now is make up for this. Hopefully, Ben will let him.

-present-

"I can't believe you're recreating that date you flaked on." Ben says in astonishment, genuine disbelief and amusement in his voice.

"I never did get around to making it up to you." Kenji sighs, remembering that day and regretting it immediately. "So, what do you think?"

"Well, let's watch the movie first. Then I'll let you know." Ben replies teasingly, settling into Kenji's side.

"Just hold onto me if you get scared, babe." He teases, earning him a playful nudge to the side.

Ben jumps a few times through the film, but for the most part, he just stays cuddled against Kenji, eating popcorn and laughing at whatever dumb comment Kenji can think of. A small part of him wonders if he would have been jumpier when they were younger, but Kenji can't complain. Back then, they probably couldn't have sat this close or talk so loudly as they watched. Perks of being rich.

When the movie ends, they both stand up and applaud obnoxiously, laughing to themselves for how dumb they're being. The employees waiting to clean up after them just watch on indifferently. He makes sure to tip them generously since he and Ben got popcorn everywhere from their shenanigans.

As far as first dates go- or rather, first date do-overs- this was definitely a success.

Hopefully one day, they won't have to sneak around or rent out whole theaters in fear of scandal. Now that they're both out of the closet and filming is well underway, it feels like that day is quickly approaching.

Once again, Kenji has to remind himself not to jump the gun. They're not even technically together- just enjoying each other's company and seeing where it's going.

But if this is what *not-dating* is like with Ben, he can't wait to see what *actually* dating him is going to be like.

And yeah, he has every intention of sticking it out this time.

--

One thing people need to remember about filmmaking- or any profession really- is that plans can change and the unexpected can happen. As unpleasant as these roadbumps can be, all one can do is remain professional and carry on.

Yeah, Kenji's professionalism is going to be tested today.

They're well into filming for 'In The Stars', and many of the scenes featuring the minor roles have been filmed already. One minor role in the film is James, Peter's (Ben) secondary love interest who thinks Peter is wasting his time on the indecisive Louis (Kenji). They had yet to film any of James' scenes yet, but a couple of days before he was supposed to begin filming, the actor was in a car accident and is now hospitalized. He's alive and (mostly) well, but a broken leg and bruises everywhere means he can't exactly work for a while.

So, the studio decided to recast- and who should they pick but none other than *Zach frickin' Mitchell.* The second Kenji saw the guy on set, he nearly ate shit when he tripped over his own feet in surprise and shock.

Kenji doesn't exactly care for Zach. He doesn't hate the guy or anything, but the few instances where their paths have crossed has left a bad taste in Kenji's mouth.

For example, Zach was a lead actor in the Jurassic World film that Camp Cretaceous was a spinoff of. One night, they happened to be at the same party and Kenji was kind of excited to meet him, but when the time came, Zach literally asked him who he was. It was honest and probably innocent, but to say Kenji was annoyed is an understatement.

The guy also came out as Bisexual, years before Kenji. Not that it's a competition, but Kenji literally made himself wait longer to come out publicly in fear of seeming to be 'following Zach's example' or whatever. He was reluctant to even enlist Gray's help when he came out for the same reason, but his desire for the least headache inducing route possible won out.

But his biggest reason, one he won't be sharing with anyone, is that there were tabloid rumors of Zach and Ben dating at one point. The rumor didn't last long at all, because the next day, Zach revealed his relationship with a woman. Still, the idea that Zach and Ben were linked like that, even as Kenji was 'dating' Brooklynn, increased his aversion to the man.

So you can imagine Kenji's surprise and simmering annoyance when he saw Zach and Ben talking on the set of their movie. He doesn't have any scenes to film today, but he showed up to surprise Ben. Maybe he should have stayed home.

Still, since he bothered to come, and since he wanted to see Ben, he puts on his big boy pants and deals with it.

Ben and Zach begin filming their first scene together- a fairly simple one. James is angry with Peter for choosing the emotionally unavailable Louis over him, and he's confronting him about it.

As Kenji watches, he admires the way Ben shifts into character so easily, his facial expressions alone conveying so much emotion. And, though Kenji is loath to admit it, Zach is also good at what he does. The scene grows more and more intense, and by the time Wu yells 'cut' Zach is pinning Ben to the wall and trying to kiss him forcefully. Er- James is pinning Peter to the wall, rather.

Kenji *might* have pulled a muscle from how tense he got watching the

two go at it.

“Excellent work, you two.” Wu praises. “I can really feel the passion. I don’t think we need a second take, so why don’t you take five while we set up the next scene.”

“Thanks, Henry.”

As Ben leaves the set, his eyes meet Kenji’s and his face immediately lights up. In an instant, he catches himself, acting like he didn’t just smile brightly at him, and walks over completely calm. Like Kenji said, excellent facial control.

“Hey, Kenj. You filming today?” Ben says nonchalantly, slipping into his well practiced, slightly over the top bro-voice. Kenji has to stifle a laugh.

“Nope. Just wanted to see what’s going on today.” Kenji sings, nudging Ben a little.

“Well as you saw, it looks like Pete is getting roughed up.” Ben quips, the pair laughing.

A third laugh joins theirs and Kenji nearly sprains something from how hard he rolls his eyes. Zach meanders over to them and, whether unintentionally or very intentionally, sticks himself between Kenji and Ben.

“Hey, it’s Ken, right?” Zach offers a hand, a smile on his face.

“Kenji, actually.” He corrects, reluctantly taking the hand. Zach squeezes it and his smile gets even wider.

“Yeah, I think we met at a party once, right?”

“Sounds right.” Kenji replies in the most amicable voice he can manage. “I’m also the other lead in this film.”

“Oh, congrats man! I remember when I got my first romance leading role.” Zach laughs, patting him on the back. Kenji just smiles. The second the guy turns away from him, he frowns at Ben, who just grimaces at him.

“Say, Ben, since we have some time, why don’t we go to my trailer and run some lines?” He puts an arm around Ben, probably meant to be a friendly gesture. The way his hand kind of massages Ben’s shoulder suggests something else entirely though, and Kenji nearly reaches over to swat him.

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind.” Ben says simply. His answer is met with a tight squeeze by Zach.

What.

Kenji moves faster than his brain can react. In front of Zach and everyone nearby, he drags Ben away by the arm until they’re behind the makeup station. When he finally realizes what he’s doing, he lets go of Ben. The taller man looks at him with bemusement.

“First of all, ow. Second of all, what the hell was that about??” Ben asks, his voice going high pitched.

“I- uh.” Kenji clears his throat. “I didn’t mean to-”

“To what? Drag me away like a child? Someone probably saw that- Zach definitely saw that.”

“Sorry. I just got upset and didn’t think about what I was doing.”

“Upset? About what?”

“He was making a *pass* at you.” Kenji explains.

“What? Who? Zach?”

“Uh, yeah? He was massaging you, asking you to ‘run lines with him in his trailer’.” Kenji says childishly. Ben just wrinkles his brow.

“He was not *massaging* me.” Before Kenji can interject, Ben continues. “Besides, I run lines with the others in their trailers sometimes. Why is it only ‘flirting’ if it’s Zach?”

“Because he’s Bi!” Kenji explains, realizing how dumb that sounds. Yeah, he should have thought some of this through.

“And?? So are you!”

“Yeah, but we’re dating- er, or whatever it is we are.” Kenji says

quietly, his voice hushed and a little too timid for his liking.

Ben doesn't say anything to that. After a moment, he sighs and steps closer to Kenji.

"I think after everything we've done so far, we can say we're dating." Ben says softly, matching his tone and volume. The implications of what he said is not lost on Kenji, but he's too focused on the endearing smile on the shorter man's face. "Is that why you're upset? Because we didn't really define what we are?"

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm *not* happy that we're official or whatever now." Kenji admits.

"Or whatever." Ben laughs.

"But I guess I got… *jealous* when Zach put his arm around you. It didn't help that he was assaulting you just before that."

"That was *James* assaulting *Peter."* Ben reminds him. "And you didn't like I was gonna be alone with him in his trailer?"

"Well if you were me, would you be okay with that?" Kenji pouts.

"Yeah."

"Really? You wouldn't be jealous or-"

“It’s because I trust you.” Ben says simply. Kenji immediately backpedals.

“It’s not that I *don’t* trust you! I’m just–”

“Jealous.” Ben says again.

“...yeah.”

Ben sighs once more, stepping even more in Kenji’s space. He looks around and, convinced the coast is clear, puts his arms around Kenji’s neck and plants one on his cheek. He's sure his face is red from how cute that was, and it certainly doesn't help that Ben's face is so close to his own, his expression smug.

“I'll admit- I kinda like you jealous. It’s endearing.”

“Don’t make fun of me, babe.” Kenji continues pouting, though he knows his red cheeks are probably betraying him. The shorter man kisses his other cheek, his smile growing wider.

“It’s a nice turn from how it was before.” Ben says casually.

“What do you mean?” Kenji asks, confused.

“Well, I was always jealous of Brooklynn back then.” Ben reminds him. Kenji feels a pang of guilt in his chest at his words. “Even when we were together, you talked to her a lot.”

Ben’s eyes kind of gloss over as he speaks, and the sight doesn’t bode well for Kenji.

“It wasn’t *that* often.” Kenji tries, then realizes that he said something similar a long time ago.

“Hmm. Regardless, every time I *did* see you two talk and felt that way, I kept it bottled up. We were supposed to be hiding, after all.” Ben's voice is softer now, his gaze focused on nothing.

"You *did* confront me." Kenji muses.

"And look what happened after that." Ben returns, not sounding at all happy. "I kept thinking... maybe things would have worked out if I just kept quiet and didn't-"

Oh, this isn’t good. Ben seems to be spiraling.

“Babe-”

“After that time at the cafe, I just... never felt better. I think that was the first time I went crying to Bumpy.” Ben mumbles out.

Time at the cafe…? What is he– Oh. OH. No way…

“Are you talking about the day we were supposed to watch a movie?"

"Yeah."

"So you mean you-"

“It doesn’t matter.” Ben shakes his head.

“No, hold on babe. You… Is that why you didn’t answer my calls that whole day?”

“Yeah? I called and texted you, but you weren’t answering. I didn’t know what to do, so I went looking for you. I happened to pass by the cafe down the street and… there you were, talking with Brooklynn inside.”

It all suddenly makes sense. Of course he didn’t answer any of Kenji’s calls. If Kenji were in his shoes, he wouldn't. Well, judging from how he reacted to the 'innocent' things Zach did, he might have made a scene in that cafe.

Which just illustrates how wrong he did by Ben and how crappy he feels all over again.

“Oh my god. I’m so-”

“Don’t apologize. You’ve done that already.” Ben says sadly. Though, Kenji isn’t sure if he’s sad that Kenji still feels bad about it or if it’s because he’s remembering how he felt back then.

Without thinking, Kenji wraps his own arms around Ben and hugs him

tightly against him. Ben sputters, apparently not expecting him to do that.

“Hey- We shouldn't be-”

“I apologized for everything else, but I didn’t even *know* about this.” Kenji muses. “I know my words can’t make up for everything that happened, but… I hope my actions can, over time.”

“That almost sounds like a proposal.” Ben laughs nervously.

“Babe, we just became official today. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Kenji returns the laugh. Ben doesn’t say anything. Instead, he buries his face in Kenji’s neck, his body relaxing. Kenji doesn’t know if they’re hidden well enough to be doing this. He’d hate to think someone has captured this moment and they’ll once again be the center of another scandal.

Right now, he doesn’t care.

“I’m just happy you’re here now.” Ben says so softly, Kenji wasn’t sure he heard him correctly. "Just don't drag me away every time you get jealous, okay?"

"No promises."

Mingling with all his warm, happy feelings, settles another sense of guilt.

There’s something he’s been hiding from Ben. The day he decided he was going to make amends, he also became resolved to reveal everything to the other; Why he acted the way he did and why he and Ben ended things so badly. He wasn’t going to air it on Gray’s interview. But, it’s been months, and he still hasn’t found the right time to tell him.

It's important, and after all this time without an idea what his deal was, he figures Ben deserves to know.

“One day, I’ll tell you.” Kenji whispers back, unable to stop himself from saying it.

“What?” Ben asks cutely, and Kenji laughs.

“Nothing.” Taking a risk, he kisses Ben.

They pull apart the second a PA starts calling for Ben, wondering where he is. Ben goes back, leaving Kenji behind the makeup station alone. He’ll leave in a second, lest someone see him and wonder why they were back there together. He's just glad Zach didn't come looking for Ben himself.

As he waits, he decides that sooner is probably better than later to confess everything. Now, it's just a matter of how to bring it up.

Hopefully, once he airs everything out, they can finally move past it. Hopefully, it doesn't *drive Ben away again.*

Chapter End Notes

Just Like A Movie by Wallows

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks so much for reading!

I apologize this chapter took so long. I think this is the second longest I've ever taken to update a fic ^^; The holidays were so chaotic and packed for me, I barely had any free time, let alone time to write and draw. The new year also meant I got busy with work. Still, I've been hammering away at this when I can, and have finally reached the point I needed to. Yay~!

Just as a warning, the next two chapters are going to be mostly flashbacks. We're finally going to be getting the whole story about what happened between Ben and Kenji back then! Look forward to it!

Don't hold me to this, but I'm aiming for Tuesday, 1/31 for the next chapter!
EDIT: Sorry, gonna push the update to Friday, 2/03! It's a really long chapter lol
EDIT 2: It's a really long chapter... lol Gonna try and finish by Monday, 2/06!
EDIT 3: ... check back Wednesday, 2/08. Sorry again lol

Heather

Chapter Summary

Ben tells Darius what happened between him and Kenji all those years ago

Chapter Notes

cw// mentioned child abuse, mild violence

Hello! This one is long (and maybe a little painful)! Hope you enjoy!

Ben POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ben has long since moved on from being a meek teenager with big dreams- he's more confident, more outgoing, and more willing to try new things. To his credit, he's actually achieved some of those 'big dreams.' While he is confident in his own talent and hard work, he won't deny that all of those changes, in some shape or form, stem from what happened between him and Kenji.

He's also grateful that, despite what happened and how different they are now, he and Kenji were able to reconnect and move forward.

That said, though he may no longer be that meek boy, he never got used to mingling with strangers or making polite conversation. Award season is hell, interviews are annoying, and to say he hates parties is an understatement.

That's where he finds himself tonight, unfortunately. Yaz is celebrating the third anniversary of the founding of her stunt-team and Ben, along with the rest of the cast of CC and In The Stars, are invited. The shindig is to be held on some rooftop club that she rented

out. His initial reaction was to decline the invite, for the aforementioned reasons, but Kenji and the others will be there and he's already missed several get-togethers with them over the years. He really shouldn't miss this one.

So, he allowed himself to be dragged there by an enthusiastic Kenji.

Funnily enough, Kenji's excitement for the party waned the second he laid eyes on Zach who, of course, was invited as well. He was able to placate the shorter man for a while, finding it the perfect excuse not to socialize all that much, but eventually, the ever friendly Kenji started to mingle on his own.

At the very least, Ben was able to find an empty couch away from the crowd to pick at his hors d'oeuvres in welcome solitude. From here, he can people watch- a habit he picked up to better his acting. Different people act in different ways doing the same thing, and he's incorporated some of these ticks into his own performances.

Sammy, for example. The Texan has the tendency to laugh boisterously, telling you exactly how funny she thinks something is. She'll also get into your space as if you've known each other for years, even if you're practically strangers. She's currently doing both of these things to Zach, the man seemingly humoring her despite the grimace on his face.

His eyes move to Darius, who's chatting with Brooklynn, Yaz, and one of her stuntmen. Darius is deceptively social, with his bookish charm and quick wit that is sure to win over even the most sour of people. The guy also does this funny thing where he puts his hand on his temple when he's thinking too hard. Ben mimicked this quirk in a television role once. Darius called him up the day after it aired to ask about it, much to Ben's amusement.

Of course, eventually, Ben's eyes search for a head of coiffed hair and the guy it's attached to. It's easy enough to spot him- he's tall, even by Hollywood standards. Kenji is currently stuffing crab puffs in his mouth as he chats with an actor Ben vaguely recognizes. The guy has a tendency to put on airs and act differently around certain people. When he's comfortable around you, he's actually quite uncouth. The duality is something Ben always found endearing. If you know him well enough, he wears his heart on his sleeve and is easy to read.

Well, for the most part.

'One day, I'll tell you.'

That's what Kenji said to him the other day, after their little rendezvous behind the makeup tent on set. Ben wracked his brain for the longest time trying to figure out what he meant by that, when suddenly it clicked- Why did Kenji let things end up the way they did between them? Surely thats what he meant? Though, that may be wishful thinking. He's wondered about that for years, despite the pain remembering that time often brings him.

Nowadays, he simply tries to think of what happened as stepping stones- a difficult part of their life they had to overcome and eventually move past.

Still, it isn't hard to get swept up thinking about all that again.

"Ben? You okay?"

"Huh?"

Ben, broken of his daze, looks up and finds Darius in front of him, the other looking concerned.

“I called you a few times but you were zoned out. You doing okay?”

“Oh. Yeah, I’m fine.” He quickly answers. Darius’ expression says he’s unconvinced, but he doesn’t press further.

“Do you mind if I sit with you? I’m kind of partied out right now, but Brooklynn isn’t.”

“Brooklynn? Why, is she your ride or something?”

Darius suddenly looks at him wide eyed. He does that thing where he exaggeratedly gestures with his hands, trying to emphasize what he’s saying.

“Uh, yeah! Haha, I misplaced my license recently. She sometimes uses a personal driver and said she’d be my ride haha.” The laughter he tacks on is obviously forced, as is his explanation, but as the guy dropped his concerned questions towards Ben, he figures he owes him the same courtesy.

“Yeah, I get it. Rideshares aren’t exactly an option for us either, right?” Darius, noticeably relieved, smiles at him.

“Totally. Last time I rode a Lyft, the driver refused to take me anywhere unless I did a TikTok with him.”

“Yeesh, did you do it?”

“It was that or walk home. He made me do a line from ‘Crow’s Nest.’ I don’t even remember saying it!”

The pair laugh, settling into a familiar and comfortable rhythm of conversation. They do this for over an hour, but with Darius, time just flies. But, one should also remember that, with Darius, you shouldn’t let your guard down.

“So I rolled out of frame, which looked great, but I crashed right into the boom operator.”

“Nooo.” Darius exclaims.

“Yup. Rolled a little too far. He wasn’t hurt or anything, but I did end up breaking the boom arm. I felt so bad I paid for it right then and there.”

“Man, that’s insane. I haven’t actually seen the 'Kim Possible’ movie yet, but I’ll definitely check it out.”

“Eh, it’s okay, not my best work.” Ben says coyly.

“Well, for a stunt like that, I’m sure it is.” Darius teases. “That reminds me of when Kenji almost drove the motorcycle into the AD. You remember? He was so embarrassed, he refused to shoot that scene until he redid the lessons all over again.”

Ben smiles, remembering that day. Once again, he's reminded of his time on set of Camp Cretaceous, though this time, for pleasant reasons. Well, pleasant for those who weren't that poor AD.

"We had to do some pretty dangerous things, huh? Remember when they had Yaz jump over that river?"

"No stunt-double or anything. To be fair, she's the one who insisted. I guess we should have figured she'd be into stunt work after that."

"Oh, for sure." Ben agrees. He raises his glass of water, to which Darius does the same. "To Yaz and 'The Slackers'."

"Why did she pick that name? Seems like it might be detrimental from a business sense." Darius ponders.

"It's memorable. I think she used to call Kenji that all the time on set. Every time she did, he always worked harder to prove her wrong."

"Ah, so a reverse psychology thing. Sounds like Yaz, alright." Darius laughs, as does Ben. It's ever so subtle, but Darius seems to shift himself so he's facing Ben directly, his attention trained on him more than before. "I'm glad you're able to talk about our Camp days so freely now. You used to always change the subject if it came up."

Ah, there it is. Darius likes to lure you into a false sense of security and then strike. Now, he seems to have Ben right where he wants him. Denying what he's saying means proving him right, so Ben, a little uncomfortably, goes along with it.

"Well, things are different now."

“With Kenji, you mean.”

“Yeah, but I mean in general as well. We’re not the same people we were when everything happened.”

“I’m still not entirely sure *what* happened. I know you’re probably sick of me asking, but…” Darius trails off, hoping Ben gets what he’s trying to say.

“I know, I know.” Ben sighs. “You’ve always been patient with me. You’re always willing to lend me an ear and have always been a good friend. I’m grateful.”

“Thanks. You know, you don’t have to tell me.” Darius clarifies. “I just… He hasn’t told me either and, sorry if this seems invasive, but I’m just really curious. I figured, now that it seems you two are better now-”

“More than better.” Ben corrects, a hint of a smile in his voice.

“Right. Since that’s the case, I was wondering if you’d be willing to share what happened with me.”

Ben is hesitant. Of course he is. Moving on from what happened doesn’t necessarily mean he’s okay with sharing the details about it- effectively reliving it all over again. There are parts of that story he hasn’t thought about in ages, parts he’d rather never remember again. And as disappointed as he’d be, he knows Darius will stay true to his word and let him keep it a secret.

But maybe he shouldn't. Ben says he's able to move on, to not linger on the past… but that might just be him trying to convince himself.

Maybe telling Darius, and confronting it all over again, especially after (what he assumes) Kenji was talking about, can Ben actually start to heal from it.

At the very least, it'll satisfy the other's curiosity.

Well, here we go…

He begins with the day they met- in the table read for the pilot. He tells him of how his first impression of him changed in a matter of minutes, and that the subsequent days of running lines and filming changed his opinion more and more. He reveals that Kenji was the first person he came out to, and that he developed a crush on the taller boy. He talks about sharing a bed during their Florida trip, texting Kenji constantly while he hid his involvement with show, and how embarrassed he was when Kenji ran and hugged him when he showed up for season 2. He reveals how they got together, sans anything regarding Kenji's dad's abuse towards him, and how hard dating in secret was.

Then he gets to that day he found Kenji and Brooklynn talking in a cafe when they were supposed to be on a date.

"I didn't know what to think." Ben says softly. "He told me he was running late, but I wouldn't have guessed it was because he was chatting with someone else nearby. You can imagine my surprise when I saw it was Brooklynn of all people."

"Why didn't you confront him?" Darius asks, his voice tight for some reason.

“I didn’t want to make a scene. They were both laughing and Kenji seemed relaxed. With me, we had to hide all the time, so he was kind of on edge constantly. When I saw them together, he was just… *so natural.* You know?”

Darius just nods.

“Of course, I felt like shit after. I called my mom and she picked me up. I guess he eventually realized and tried calling a whole bunch, but I wasn’t in the mood to talk. I just cried all night.”

“Ben…” Darius says with sympathy. “Is that why you didn’t come to the set for a few days?”

“I felt even worse, because you guys couldn’t film without me. I pretended I was sick, but of course Kenji knew better.” Ben says sadly. “He apologized and everything, but–”

“Seeing him and Brooklynn like that was hard to get out of your head.” Darius finishes for him.

“Something like that, yeah.”

Ben is surprised how easy it is to talk about all this. He's only told this story twice- to Bumpy, when it was happening, and to his therapist years later. Of course, talking about seeing your boyfriend chatting up a girl isn’t exactly pleasant, but it pales in comparison to the rest of the story.

“Okay, obviously something happened, because he and her… you know.”

Ben takes a deep breath and steels himself for the rest of the tale.

“Well, after that…”

-six years ago-

“Look Sean, you know what’s best for you, but if a boy did that to me, I’d dump him.” Bumpy tells poor Ben, who looks even more distraught than he did when he caught her and asked for advice.

The two of them talking and airing out their problems has become commonplace. Bumpy’s problems are typically job related and Ben’s are almost entirely about one person: Kenji. He’s just explained to her how his movie date went, and her advice for him is to leave Kenji, apparently.

Ben does not like that answer.

“I know what I said he did sounds bad-”

“Yeah.” Bumpy scoffs.

“But I can’t just… *dump* him. I’m…” *The only one who knows about his situation with his dad,* he finishes mentally. He’d never reveal that to someone else, not even Bumpy. Kenji specifically asked him not to. Heck, she doesn't even know the guy he's talking about *is* Kenji. He just made up a random name and she bought it. As far as she knows, he's in a budding relationship with a dude named 'Mike.'

Besides, the other's secrets is *not* his only reason to stay.

“You...?” She prompts.

“I’ve never had a relationship before.” He continues. “I mean, if I gave up at the first road bump, wouldn't that be lame of me?”

He really hopes he isn’t coming across as some petulant child who refuses to see reason. But he genuinely believes in what he just said- He’s already made an effort to help Kenji keep several secrets. Surely he can forgive him for his… mistake. He’s just hurt right now. He hasn’t even answered any of the taller teen’s texts or calls.

Bumpy groans as she shakes her head.

“As long as you’re sure, Sean. You know, I’m glad you trust me enough to talk about this, but the one you really should be talking to is Mike.” Bumpy puts a hand on his shoulder. “Otherwise, nothing will get better.”

Her using Kenji's fake name both tickles him and puts him on edge. Still, Ben appreciates the gesture and the advice. Too bad the latter makes his stomach churn.

But he’s going to do it… when he gets the chance.

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To everyone 's surprise, Kenji’s dad is on set instead of the regular bodyguard-babysitter. The ‘friendly’ but intimidating man has never once stayed for the dailies, and the fact that he’s wearing a business suit like some executive producer makes him stick out like a sore thumb. As it is, it's making him, and a few others, uncomfortable.

Kenji specifically seems the most affected. For the entire time he was on set, he was in his ‘cool kid’ persona, and his dad looked on at him with pride. And, despite his numerous attempts to reach Ben on the phone a few days before, he didn’t spare him a second of his time.

He did, however, spend a considerable amount with Brooklynn in between takes.

So yeah, Ben never got a chance to talk.

Help comes in the form of Sammy, who suggests they all go out to eat. Everyone's guardians, except one, seemed okay with it, but after a quick word with the man, Kenji is also allowed to go.

Kirby’s, it seems, is no longer just Ben and Kenji’s spot, since that’s where they ended up going to. At least he’ll know what he wants to order already. Their guardians join them, sitting at their own table nearby.

The boys sit on one side and the girls on the other. The amount of food on their table is staggering, but as expected of teenagers, they're able to make a considerable dent. The conversation flows as easily as the free refills- something Yaz takes advantage of.

"What? Not every restaurant has raspberry iced tea. If I could, I'd drink it all the time." She tells them rather defensively.

"Sure, but that's like your fifth refill." Brooklynn points out.

"Hey, it's free. You guys are not getting your money's worth."

"Y'all, you're not gonna believe what I overheard the producers talking about." Sammy pipes up.

"Are we getting more seasons?" Darius asks excitedly.

"What? Naw, you know we're only getting five." Sammy corrects, a hint of sadness in her voice. She immediately shakes it off and leans in close. "So, you know how it seems like they're hinting more and more that Raini and Kausar might have feelings for each other?"

"No idea what you're talking about." Brooklynn deadpans, earning her a playful nudge from Yaz.

"Yes, Sammy. We're all aware how wonderfully gay-coded they are." Yaz relents. At the mention of the 'g' word, Kenji tenses next to him. Though, just like everyone else, the taller teen seems interested in what the Texan has to say.

“Well, ‘coded’ ain’t gonna be a part of it anymore!” She says excitedly. At first no one reacts, because… what?

“You mean, they’re going to make them get together? Like, a couple?” Darius asks, and everyone else seems to have a collected moment of ‘oh, duh.’

“Yup! By the end of season 4, if I heard right.”

“Whoa… I never thought they’d actually follow through on all the pining and meaningful looks.” Ben muses.

“That’s not the end of the news, though!” Sammy pipes up again. “I also heard *another* pair is gonna become official.”

Oh.

Part of Ben prays that it’s Paul and Jenna. Out of everyone here, those two share the most screen time together. Not to mention that off camera, the two are practically joined at the hip. Though, as Ben looks over at Darius, who shows no sign of interest, he gets the feeling that isn’t who Sammy is talking about.

There were rumors early in season three’s production that they’d be giving Kenji and Brooklynn’s characters more screen time for season four, and it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what that means. He just really hopes that isn’t the case.

“Jenna… and Ryan.” Sammy whispers, as if that’s somehow juicier than the Raini/Kausar bombshell.

Ah. Ben thought so.

Behind the scenes, those two are the most popular out of all of them. There's a whole separate fandom out there that focuses solely on Jenna and Ryan, fans who think the two are meant to be together. That appreciation extends to the actors themselves, though Ben isn't sure if that means they wish they'd get together.

This revelation, though expected, makes Ben's mood take a nosedive.

"Sorry. Gonna go to the bathroom." Ben excuses himself, leaving the table.

The second he's in the restroom, he sighs heavily, finding solace in the humming of the fluorescent lights and muffled chatter rather than his friends' gossip. He loves it when he and the others can find the time to chat, but he has his limits of social interaction and he's reaching it. Besides, the topic of discussion wasn't really something Ben wanted to be a part of.

He doesn't even get a minute to himself before someone else enters the room- that someone being Kenji.

Ben immediately turns around and faces the sink. Maybe the taller teen actually does want to use the restroom, but there were many times they've used this tactic as a way to talk inconspicuously. They just need to face the sink and look as if you're washing your hands.

Just like he thought he would, Kenji takes the sink next to him. He looks at him through the mirror.

“Hi.” Kenji says simply.

“Hey.” Ben replies.

A moment of silence passes between them. This is the first time they’ve been able to talk privately in days- either because their schedules haven’t lined up, or in Ben's case, refusing to make time for it.

“I’m sorry about the other day. I dropped my phone, so I couldn’t answer your texts and calls.”

Oh, so you dropped it when you were talking in that cafe? Interesting, Ben thinks to himself. Outloud, he says nothing, so Kenji continues.

“When I noticed, I found the thing and saw how much you were trying to reach me. I tried calling back. You… still haven’t answered.”

“I know.” Is all Ben says. As much as he’d like to drag this out and make Kenji apologize properly, he misses the guy terribly and is willing to just move on. After a moment, he continues. “I forgive you. Sorry I didn’t pick up. I was just…”

“Mad at me?” Kenji offers, remorse in his voice.

“Yeah.”

“I get it. I forgive you, too, by the way.”

“You better.” Ben faux-chastises. He bumps shoulders with Kenji, who laughs and bumps him back.

“It might be a while before we can try going to a movie again…” Kenji laments.

“I don’t mind. Just pick something other than horror, okay?”

“We’ll see.”

Though they’re in a bathroom, Ben is finding himself relaxing more than he has in days.

It’s just…

Though it seems that their short conversation has solved their issue, Ben still has questions. Sure, he’ll buy Kenji’s whole ‘phone on the ground’ explanation, but why is he omitting the fact he lost track of time because of Brooklynn? What were they even talking about for so long?

And… does Ben have anything to worry about?

As Ben is about to speak up, the door to the bathroom opens. It’s some random guy, thankfully, but the second the door squeaked, Kenji bolted out of there, not even bothering to dry his hands. Kenji, since the start of their relationship, has always been jumpy. For some

reason, though, that exit just now felt excessively so.

He chooses not to read into it.

Ben leaves the restroom a minute later, hoping that their little rendezvous goes unnoticed. No one says anything or seems suspicious when he returns, but unfortunately, the topic of conversation hasn't changed since he left.

"I'm just saying- if you two are going to have a kiss scene, you're gonna need to practice or something." Yaz says as Ben is taking his seat.

"Not Brooklynn." Sammy supplies. "She already kissed someone on that Disney show of hers."

"That was ages ago…" The pink haired girl says, uncharacteristically shy. Ben notes that Darius pouts at this, for some reason.

"Still more experience than me." Kenji pipes up. "I've never been kissed."

Oh.

Ben grips his knees tightly. In his mind, he has flashbacks to every kiss they shared- every stolen moment in a dark corner on set or in an empty parking lot.

He knows Kenji is trying to keep their relationship under wraps. He

knows he's lying to protect them, especially since his dad is sitting nearby and might overhear. Heck, that little conversation they had in the restroom was risky as it is.

None of that makes him feel any better.

Still, they just reconciled about the movie incident. He shouldn't let himself be upset over this.

Then, they start going around the table, talking about their experiences kissing, and Ben- like Kenji- has to lie about it.

This night just seems to be getting longer and longer.

Season three only has a few episodes left to film, and now that they're in the home stretch, everyone is getting closer and closer to burnout. Legally, the six of them can only be on set for so long, but that just means the directors are trying to cram as much filming as they can in such a tight window.

Breaks are scarce and short, meals have to be taken in between shots, and everyone is just more on edge than ever.

Ben has noticed that Kenji especially seems like he's one straw away from breaking. He can't blame him- his dad is on set all the time now, and the man is not quiet. He makes suggestions to the directors, gives orders to stagehands and other staff like he works here, and is generally just a pest. Since he's Kenji's guardian, most people just deal with him, but Kenji is exhausted- he essentially has a second job of

reining in his dad, and it seems to be a losing battle.

In all of this, their few moments of respite have either been spent with Kenji or finding something else to do because Kenji is busy chatting with Brooklynn. He'd join them, but the atmosphere those two give off makes it seem like he'd be intruding- a weird thing to say about your boyfriend and your other friend, for sure.

He feels a bit silly thinking that something more is happening between them- when the taller teen does give him the time of day, they laugh and play around, and on the off chance they're totally alone, they do more. Of course, with that last one, it's become increasingly difficult now that Kenji's dad is always skulking around set.

If you're wondering, Ben still hasn't talked to Kenji about anything. He decided to let things be and to not put any more stress on the taller teen. Bumpy tells Ben that if he doesn't, it's him who'll be at the breaking point soon. Though he appreciates the concern, he thinks she's exaggerating.

He's curious, and still a little hurt by what went down, but right now is just not the best time.

One day, Kenji arrived on set with the usual bodyguard, no sign of his dad anywhere. His initial reaction was joy- without him micromanaging everything, Kenji might get to relax a little. You know, as far as one can on a grueling filming schedule.

Kenji seemed more gloomy than he did the past few weeks. Concerned, Ben pulls the other aside during their lunch break and questions him about it.

"What's wrong? You don't look so good."

“It’s nothing. Tired.” Kenji replies, his tone noncommittal.

“Bull. Yesterday, you looked tired. Today is… worse.” Kenji gives him a hard look- like he wants to challenge that assertion, but instead of saying anything else, he simply shakes his head and turns to leave.

He doesn’t get more than two steps.

Ben wraps his arms around Kenji’s midsection, holding him there. If he really wanted to, the taller teen could easily break free. But he stands there, letting Ben hold him. He isn’t sure how long they stay like this, but he isn’t letting go until Kenji talks to him.

A choked sob is what he gets.

“Kenji??” Ben lets go and gets around to face Kenji.

His eyes are filled to the brim with tears, though none of them fall. His face is red, and his mouth is in a deep frown. He’s physically shaking, as if he’s willing himself not to cry and failing.

He looks miserable.

Suddenly, Kenji’s arms are around him, returning the embrace. Carefully, Ben wraps his arms around again. The second he does, another choked sob comes from the taller teen and Ben squeezes him tighter.

They don’t say anything at first- Ben just allowing Kenji to cry as he holds onto him. He hopes this is enough to anchor him, stopping him from drifting further away. They’ve been like ships in the night too often lately. Through the cries, the taller teen finally speaks.

“He did it again.”

Ben doesn’t need clarification.

Normally Ben can tell when something happens between Kenji and his dad. There's a certain shift in behavior that is too subtle for most people to notice, but Ben does, every time. He normally tries distracting him or making him laugh- anything to get his mind off of it. Kenji explains that most times it's just yelling. Today, however, it seems the bastard put his hands on him again.

“Does it hurt when I’m holding you?” Ben asks. He can feel Kenji shake his head no.

“I’m so tired, Seanny.” Kenji’s voice is wracked. “He kept coming to the set, causing trouble. Last night, I finally told him to quit coming if that’s how he was going to act, and then he-”

“Shh. Don’t think about it.”

“He looked so sorry afterwards, tried to apologize, but I just ran to my room. He wasn’t home this morning.”

“Okay, I understand. Shh.”

Once again, they just stand there, holding one another. They've probably been here way too long, the others probably having finished their lunches and are getting ready for another take. They're running the risk of someone finding them.

Ben doesn't care.

After another moment, Kenji sniffles and pulls away.

"Thanks." The taller teen says softly. "You're always here for me."

"And I will be, as long as you need me." Ben tells him sincerely. Whatever thoughts he had about confronting the guy over what happened fade into the back of his mind. It can wait.

"But I haven't been there for you…" Kenji says sadly. "I'm so sorry about-"

"Hey, that and this are two different things. Besides, you already apologized." Ben interrupts. "Don't worry about anything else right now except acting your butt off." Kenji doesn't laugh, but he does smile a bit.

"Okay." Kenji relents.

"Okay." Ben looks back towards where everyone else is. "I don't think we have time for a proper lunch. Did you wanna stop by crafty on our way b-"

Kenji cuts Ben off by closing the distance between them and kissing him like his life depended on it. Part of him is happy that he and Kenji have finally shared a kiss again after so long. Another part of him feels like he shouldn't be allowing this- they're going to be caught AND it vaguely feels like he's taking advantage of the other.

Soon enough, Kenji breaks the kiss himself and stares down at Ben, the softest smile on his lips.

"Well, you definitely had your first kiss now." Ben teases. Kenji rolls his eyes.

"Hush."

"Just saying, now you have 'experience' when you have to film with Brooklynn later." Ben laughs.

Kenji, for whatever reason, tenses at the mention of the pink-haired girl. His smile falters a bit, and his eyes detach from Ben's.

"Right." The taller teen dryly chuckles, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Right…" Ben echoes.

"We stopping by crafty then?" Kenji prompts, already making his way back.

Huh. That was weird, right? It's not just Ben?

He stands there alone and more than a little confused. He finally snaps out of it when he hears the AD call for them. He follows Kenji, though not catching up with him.

Well, now he has even more questions.

The final days of filming the season were some of the most hectic and challenging in Ben's life. In every sense, the two episodes begin to challenge the characters and their relationships. And, judging from the script, they're really going to follow through on changing some of their dynamics.

Ryan is going to be mad at Paul, not easily forgiving him for letting Jenna be bait for the mercs, thus putting a strain on one of the biggest 'bromances' in television. And, through clues that are both vague and obvious, the writers are sowing the seeds of the Ryan/Jenna romance.

Which, in turn, means that Kenji and Brooklynn are spending a lot of time together. And, it's not just on camera- behind the scenes, the pair are almost inseparable. Ben thought it was hard catching Kenji alone the last few weeks, but now, he's more likely to run into the pink haired girl than his boyfriend.

It's a good thing Ben has his own number of things to worry about to distract him from his less than active relationship.

He's the centerpiece to several action sequences and, upon his insistence, he's been doing his own stunts. Yaz is a natural- having an athletic background to begin with helps- but for Ben, training and

extra rehearsals are a must to pull everything off.

Then, there's the issue of his contract and future role in the show. He may just be a teenager, but he knows a bad deal when he sees one. The other five are either getting blossoming relationships and/or significant character development, but from the way the showrunner described the last two seasons, Sean will basically be a side character.

His mom, not understanding the ins and outs of Hollywood well enough to help, hired an agent to represent Ben's interests. Mae Turner, though relatively new in the business, has a keen sense for these kinds of things and was able to negotiate for his pay, a more proactive role in the final seasons, and royalty rights- the latter of which he wasn't aware is a thing.

She seemed happy, so Ben was happy.

Well, as happy as he can be watching from the sidelines as his boyfriend spends most of his time with a beautiful girl.

He tries to convince himself it's purely professional, that the romance only exists between their characters. They don't even formally get together until next season. The two of them are friends, as are Ben and Brooklynn, so he feels guilty thinking that she's 'in the way.' Why shouldn't they be hanging out? It makes sense.

But damn it, Ben is a teenage boy, and right now, he's jealous as hell.

So, on a day he isn't even supposed to come on set, he visits Kenji and practically begs him to talk to him.

The taller teen, serendipitously, was not hanging around Brooklynn when he caught him. Ben hates the idea he has to be so forceful to have a conversation with his boyfriend, but so far, it's the only tactic that's worked. He just wants answers.

Kenji agreed to talk, but he looked more paranoid than usual. It's as if he wasn't expecting Ben to confront him like this. Still, the fact that he let Ben drag him behind the costume tents is cause for optimism, no?

"Hey, Seanny." Kenji says, his voice a little shaky. "You don't have anything to shoot today, right? Why-"

"I really wanted to see you. It's been weeks." Ben answers, a bit more smarmy than he normally would have.

"Has it?" Kenji says unconvincingly.

"You hardly even text me back anymore." Ben points out. "And no, the group chat doesn't count."

"I totally wasn't going to say that." The dry laugh he lets out lets Ben know that he was indeed going to counter with that. "I just- I have a lot to film and prepare for. We do the first table reads for season four in two weeks and we're still doing the last few scenes for-"

"I know, I work here." Ben interrupts. "Look, I get that with all the changes going on, you-"

Kenji suddenly has a hand on Ben's mouth, looking towards the tent as he does. The voices of a couple of people, probably from the costume department, come from the other side of the canvas. After a minute,

the voices recede, and Kenji relaxes his grip on him. The taller teen's expression is one of relief- of not being caught.

Or specifically, of not being caught with Ben.

He knew this was the case- they've done more drastic things to hide before. Hell, he's literally crawled on the ground to escape the gaze of a passing PA once. His knees were cherry red the next day and the crew worried he got hurt on set.

But what Kenji just did, with the state that Ben is in right now, affects him in the worse way possible. His hand, covering Ben's lips, keeping him quiet- it scalds him. It burns.

It hurts.

The second Kenji lets go, he just blurts out the question he's been dying to ask for a while now.

"Is something going on between you and Brooklynn?"

"What?" Kenji asks, bewildered. "Where is this come from?"

"Just answer the question." Ben insists.

"I-I mean, we're going to be a couple on the show next season." Kenji's brow furrows. "You know that."

“Is that why you two are always hanging out now?”

“I hang out with the others, too!” Kenji’s voice is rising. “Why are you only mad about her?”

“Oh, don’t give me that.” Ben matches his tone and volume. “I haven’t been able to catch you alone. And, by the way, you’re with her more times than not.”

“You’re seeing things that aren’t there, Seann-”

“That is *not* my name!” Ben says indignantly. “I’m Ben. Your… boyfriend. At least, I thought I was.”

“Se- Ben.” The taller teen corrects himself before continuing. “Of course you are. Why are you asking me these things? Sure, me and Brooklynn are talking a lot, but I’m supposed to be Jenna’s boyfriend next season. We need to have some kind of rapport.”

Ben is silent for a moment.

“I know.”

“But?”

“I… I’m jealous.” Ben admits. “I don’t get to be with you alone anymore, but she does. And, when you’re with her, you don’t have to hide, like we are now…”

Ben knows how to read Kenji and his expressions. He’s an excellent actor, but behind the scenes, he wears his heart on his sleeves. In every combination possible, Ben knows what emotions are going through Kenji’s mind.

Right now, he’s seeing sadness… and discomfort.

“I’m sorry.” Kenji starts, his expression the same. “You’re right. We haven't had a lot of time alone lately. But… I can’t promise it’ll get better.”

A feeling of unease washes over Ben. Part of him appreciates the honest answer, but of course, part of him doesn’t like the implication either.

“Me and her are going to be around each other a lot. And, all our spare time will be limited. I want to spend it with you too, but it might be hard.”

Ben gulps before he speaks up.

“Are you break-”

Before he can continue, he’s being pulled into a gentle hug, his face now buried in Kenji’s chest.

“But we have to try, right?”

Oh. He isn't doing what Ben thought he was.

Ben's arms immediately reciprocate the hug, holding the other around his waist as gently as he is. Kenji's grip tightens ever so slightly, but that touch that he felt was scalding not minutes ago, now feels as pleasantly warm as he remembers- moments of intimacy away from prying eyes.

Of course, as careful as they've been, they are bound to be caught.

"Kenji?!" A voice screeches loudly from behind Ben.

Suddenly, that warm embrace is gone. Kenji detached from him so quickly, he almost knocked Ben over. The taller teens expression, which had softened somewhat as he was holding Ben, now looks terrified.

"D-dad?"

Oh no.

Ben turns around, and sure enough, standing behind him is the intimidating figure of Daniel Kon, suit and all. His face is red and his expression is hard. The man barely gives Ben a glance before he's glaring at his son with confusion and anger.

"It's not what it-" Kenji tries, but stops when his father marches towards them. He not so gently brushes by Ben, once again almost knocking him down. The man is now in his son's face.

It’s insane. Kenji is tall- taller than his father. But here, as he looks at him, eyes full of fear, he seems so small. It’s like he’s making himself smaller in front of him, like a child who’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t- which wouldn't be inaccurate.

The sight scares the hell out of Ben, too.

“What the hell are you doing back here? And what are you doing with him??”

“Sir, Kenji was just-” Ben tries to speak up, to help take some of the burden off of Kenji, but the man turns his glare to him, and Ben immediately shuts up.

“I have nothing to say to you.” He says coldly before returning his attention to Kenji. “You have two scenes left. Finish them, and then we’re going home.”

Kenji’s lip trembles when he says the word ‘home.’

Despite this, he stands as tall as he can, his eyes hooded and head lowered, and replies in a practiced voice.

“Yes, dad.”

Ben has never seen him like this before and he hopes he never will again.

The man marches off, and Kenji follows behind obediently. Before he

turns the corner, he gives Ben the quickest of glances, and he can see the fear and worry in his expression. Then all too suddenly, Kenji is gone and Ben is alone.

This scenario- Kenji leaving Ben behind- has become a common occurrence lately.

And in the deep pool of dread that's been building in his chest, he fears that it will only get worse from now on.

But whatever uncomfortable feeling that thought leaves him pales in comparison to the immense concern he has for Kenji, and what might await him when he gets home.

Ben thought about contacting Kenji, to call or message, and see how he is. For the last two days, the taller teen hasn't needed to come on set, so Ben hasn't seen him. He worries about what happened with his dad, but would hate to worsen things by texting him and potentially exposing Kenji even more should his dad catch him.

So he waited.

By the third day, with Kenji not showing up on set for a scene, Ben said 'screw it' and tried calling him.

His call wouldn't go through.

Why is his phone off? Did his dad have him change phone numbers?

Did… did he block Ben's number?

On the fourth day, Kenji showed up. His dad, too, is on set.

Despite this, he seems as jovial as ever, acting like his normal self. He explains away his absence with the excuse of a cold. Everyone else bought that, but Ben didn't. Still, he can't exactly confront him since his dad is around.

And, per normal, Kenji spends a lot of his free time with Brooklynn. Though the sight still stirs up jealous feelings, Ben ignores both and focuses on finishing the season on the right foot. After all, that is what they're here to do.

The next day, they finish their final scene of season three. All of them are on a boat, sailing away from the camp they called home for the past three seasons. Ben thinks this is the best season yet, and they've all had some emotional scenes to be proud of.

The season finishing does not mean the work has ended. There are still last minute reshoots, and of course, promotional pressers and interviews. They might not be the biggest show on tv right now, but the following they do have is nothing to scoff at.

On the presser schedule, Ben and Kenji are handling a number of interviewers together, alone.

At first, Ben was glad- an excuse to be alone with the taller boy. There's every chance that his dad might accompany him, or try and

Kenji switched out with one of the others to avoid the pair meeting, but to his surprise, Kenji showed up with one of his bodyguards.

Now that he's presented with the opportunity, Ben isn't sure how to proceed. Does he just straight up ask Kenji what happened after that day? Does asking if he's okay seem asinine- or even unwarranted since he seems normal? Would Kenji, who for some reason is unable to receive Ben's calls, even want to talk to him?

Why wouldn't he? They're still dating, right? There has to be an explanation for all this.

The wait in the green room was nearly suffocating. Ben remained unsure of how to start the conversation, and Kenji seemed content on saying as little as possible to Ben. No, really- he said 'hi' and nothing else when he got there.

The interview setup has them sitting on a loveseat together while the interviewer sits in a chair across from them. It's extremely casual, with the interviews projected to only last twenty minutes each. Today, a total of four people from different entertainment news outlets are coming to ask them relatively the same questions, and their job is to entice them without giving too much away each and every time.

The life of a celebrity.

Ben has never been that great at interviews, feeling more comfortable slipping into a role rather than talking about himself. That said, it's a good thing his partner for today is Kenji- the self proclaimed expert at the form. He knows how to work a room and to have lively conversation. The contrast is probably why the studio wanted them to do it together.

The whole time, Ben is hyper aware of the fact that any time Kenji so much as brushes against him on the tiny couch, the taller teen recoils. It's subtle, as not to draw attention to himself, but Ben, who's particularly on edge because of the lack of contact with said teen, noticed.

It doesn't help that every interviewer is apparently aware of the section of their show's fandom that wants Ryan and Jenna to end up together and asks relevant questions. Ben, to his credit, is able to at least seem interested, but inside, he grew more and more annoyed at how the interviews seemed to eventually focus on that.

The last interviewer, interestingly, was different.

Eric Kirby is a young and fairly popular blogger, one who he knows to personally be a fan of their show. He mainly focuses on the older 'Jurassic' films that precede their series, but he's been vocal in support for the new movies and their show. He is also, as it turns out, the son of the owner of the restaurant the cast of CC loves to frequent.

"So, we never got to meet in person, but I always see you and the other's at my family's restaurant."

"Your family-" It clicks for Ben. "You mean 'Kirby's'?"

"Yup, in the Westgate shopping center."

"Oh, man, we love to eat there!" Kenji says excitedly. "You guys have the best burgers."

"Thanks, I'll be sure to tell my dad." Eric says with mirth in his eyes.

The interview from that point onward is pretty chill, in no small part because Eric doesn't ask them the same generic questions the others prepared. He asks about specific plot points and references, and is generally more easy going.

Ben doesn't even realize how quickly twenty minutes pass until the AD for the studio they're using is signaling them to wrap it up.

"One last question before we stop." Eric prompts.

"Shoot." Kenji tells him coolly.

"So, I hate to be that guy, but I wouldn't be doing my job unless I talk about all the romance that seems to be brewing."

Ah, there it is.

Ben suddenly becomes uninterested, and Eric seems to notice. He laughs amicably.

"Sorry. Must be tired of hearing these questions."

"Oh, no. I love letting Kenji talk about the 'will they wont they' of the campers." He jokes, earning him a laugh. Kenji however, shifts in his seat, and looks a bit uncomfortable. Ben ignores it. "Ask away."

"So, I am what you would call 'chronically online' meaning I know

how the fandom is about the characters. And, though I am in the minority, I have to say, I honestly thought Ryan and Sean had a little something going on."

Ben's heart almost jumps out of his chest. He not so subtly looks at Kenji, who just smiles at the confession.

"They are pretty close in the first two seasons, huh? Did you know that when Sean returned in season two, no one told us until the day we filmed it?"

"Really?" Eric turns his attention to Ben.

Oh, shoot. Ben is still stunned by Eric's earlier words that he doesn't answer right away. Kenji, quick on his feet, answers for him.

"Yup. That was me and Brooklynn's genuine reaction to seeing Ben was back." Kenji laughs. "But, no. It's all platonic. If you watch season three, you'll see who it is Ryan is starting to warm up to."

"Interesting! And, not to show more of my 'chronic online-ness' but I think we can all agree that Raini and Kausar seem to be-"

Ben doesn't hear anything after that.

He knows Kenji was talking about their characters and not them. That was a perfectly honest and respectful answer, considering. But to Ben, who's been more than insecure lately, it felt like Kenji was trying to tell him something. That everything Ben was dreading about him and Brooklynn is true.

That this thing between them is so easily dismissed.

Eric thanks them and the interview ends. What little crew is there starts to clean up and he and Kenji shuffle into the green room to remove their makeup before leaving.

Ben is rather shaken. He got in his head and didn't respond to Eric much. He probably looked strange for the last two minutes of the interview.

When the makeup artist leaves after cleaning them up, Kenji shuts the door behind them. The two are now, once again, alone in there. The taller teen looks down at Ben with exasperation.

"What is up with you, Seanny?" He asks.

"Nothing."

"Really? Cuz you definitely spaced out at the end there. Eric looked so confused, and frankly, he's not alone."

"I'm fine. Just… tired."

"Bull. Remember? I've used that excuse before." Kenji tells him defiantly.

"Look, can you drop it? This is the first conversation we've had in a

while and I don't want it to just be us arguing."

"I'm not arguing, I'm just asking why you're so off today."

"What happened after you went home?" Ben feels like it's now or never to ask, so he does. Kenji reels, confusion plain on his face.

"What-"

"That day I showed up on set. You looked so scared when you left, I was so worried. I tried calling but-"

"Don't change the subject. We were talking about you."

"Kenji." Ben says firmly. "Please. I want to know if you're alright. You didn't come back right away so-"

"I had a cold. I told you that already." He says quickly.

"Bull." Ben parrots.

"I don't wanna talk about it." Kenji crosses his arms, refusing to meet his eyes anymore.

"Did your dad-"

“I said I don’t want to talk about it!” He yells, his expression turning pained. Ben recoils, not used to seeing this side to the other.

“Kenji…”

“Just let it go.”

“Okay. As long as you're okay…” Ben tapers off at the end, unsure how to navigate this conversation. He’s never seen Kenji this angry- at least, not in front of the camera. But that’s not all. There’s something there the other isn’t saying.

An awkward silence lingers between them, hanging there. Ben isn’t sure what he should do. Should he grab his things and leave? Should he wait until Kenji makes the first move? Honestly, he’d like nothing more than to hug the taller teen, let him know that he’s there for him. But right now, he might be pushing it if he tried.

Kenji suddenly walks towards him, his head down. His eyes don’t break contact, and for some reason, Ben feels a chill run down his spine. This doesn’t feel like a precursor to something pleasant happening.

“Ben, we…” Kenji sighs. He rubs his eyes with the back of his hand, stops, then continues.

“We should stop dating.”

Ben almost throws up from how suddenly his stomach drops. It’s as if the floor beneath him gave way and he’s in a free fall. His ears are softly ringing, but he can hear every word Kenji says.

“We have to hide all the time, and I know how much it’s been affecting you. It’s been affecting me too. And like I said, I don’t think it’s going to get better any time soon.”

Wait. This- This can’t be happening.

Honestly, Ben- somewhat pessimist that he is- imagined this scenario before. He thought about what he would say if Kenji decided to end things. He even considered if it would be the right thing to do- to end what they have. Dating friends, dating co-stars; both scenarios describe them and both are just asking for trouble.

But thinking about it and dealing with it are two different things. Now that it’s actually happening, he panics.

“But- But you also said we should try. Remember?” He says in a small voice. The taller teen seems to hesitate at his words, but then he shakes his head and continues.

“Let’s face facts, Ben.” Kenji insists. “This would never have worked. And, honestly…” His eyes detach themselves from his own.

“Honestly?” He prompts.

“I… I don’t know how I *feel* anymore.”

“What- But, what changed? Is it because of your dad-”

“Don’t bring him into this.” Kenji snaps.

“-because if it is, we can just be more careful.”

“That’s not-”

“Or is it,” Ben starts, his voice more strained. “because of someone else?”

Kenji’s eyes shift back to him, and a flash of unease settles in them. Ben presses him further.

“That’s what it is, isn’t it? You’ve been talking to Brooklynn a lot-”

“Again with this.” Kenji rolls his eyes.

“Don’t act like I’m crazy. You were so vague when I asked about the two of you. And you and her always-”

Kenji grabs the front of his shirt, the sudden act shutting Ben up. He’d say the other looks angry, but he knows him too well. They’ve never been in this kind of situation before, but Ben can tell that Kenji himself wasn’t expecting this turn of events. The look on his face is a mixture of panic and conflict, his body probably reacting faster than his brain. In any case, he doesn’t look like someone who is thinking clearly right now. That doesn’t stop him from gripping Ben tighter.

But Ben isn’t a pushover.

Ben grabs the hands holding him and shifts his weight, flipping Kenji onto the floor. Before the taller teen can get up, Ben sits on his chest and holds his hands above his head. Kenji may be bigger than him, but Ben has a deceptively strong grip.

“Get off of me!” Kenji spews indignantly.

“Not until you tell me about why you’re doing this. If it’s because of Brooklynn-”

“Don’t talk about her.” Kenji warns.

“You like her, don’t you?” Ben blurts out, unable to stop himself. “You tell me you care about me then you sneak around with her.”

“Shut. Up.” The taller teen struggles against him, though to no avail. His brow twitches and his nostrils flare.

They’ve had their disagreements before- early on, they weren’t sure what to make of each other. There were clashing ideas and some impatient rehearsals that ended with heated exchanges, but in all this time, Ben has never seen Kenji like this.

Like he *hates* him.

“Was being with me just for fun, huh? Or was it experimenting?” Ben keeps going, unable to shut up. His voice begins to shake. “Was any of it real?”

Kenji looks up at him like he's crazy.

"I never said-"

"Because it was real to me. It was to me." Ben chokes out, tears forming in his eyes.

In every scenario he imagined this happening, in the wee hours of the morning when he couldn't sleep and the insecure thoughts took over, Ben never would've guessed it would go down like this. He imagined it like one of those old-timey movies where it's sad but amicable. He imagined it being dramatic or laughable or silently tragic. Maybe it's the actor in him, but he thought it would be like baring his soul and finding peace when it was over.

This… this hurts. There is nothing beautiful or poignant or thoughtful. It's just two boys yelling at each other, lashing out, unwilling to hear what the other is saying.

It sucks.

For the briefest of moments, Kenji's face softens. His brow eases as he looks him over. For a second, Ben sees the guy he came to know so well over the last few years. He sees the guy he shared a bed with, laughed with, and enjoyed being around. He sees the guy who kisses him and whispers sweet nothings to him and tells him all his worries.

He sees his boyfriend.

And just as quickly, he's gone.

Ben is thrown off of Kenji. The taller teen stands, quickly grabs his things, then heads to the door. To Ben's surprise, he stops, then looks at him. His eyes are distant- like black marbles with no life in them.

With his own, he conveys how much he wants him to stay- to talk to him and let them work it out. But as the seconds tick on, and Kenji's eyes seem unmoved by his gaze, Ben realizes it is well and truly over.

The taller teen slowly backs away until he finds the door handle. He doesn't turn it. Instead, he speaks in a low and deliberate voice. Though, his words couldn't have hurt more if he screamed them.

"It wasn't anything to me. I'm not a disgusting freak like you."

Kenji leaves. There's no door slamming, no Ben chasing him. Nothing.

It just… ends.

He's not sure how long he sits there, but at some point, his mom is shaking him and asking why he's on the ground.

He doesn't tell her. He *never* told her.

He can't. She can't know how pathetic he was.

Because that's apparently what he is- pathetic. And disgusting. And a

freak.

In Ben's infamous fannypack, he begun to carry around hand sanitizer. He developed a kind of need to feel clean at all times, regardless of actual cleanliness of his surroundings. It got to the point where he'd go through a few gallons a week.

Ben's not dumb- he knows why he does it. That doesn't stop him from doing it.

The first table read for season four isn't for a bit, so Ben throws himself into his work. They aren't more than bit parts or commercial roles- things he's used to doing- but it keeps him busy, and more importantly, it keeps him distracted. Through Mae's help, he no longer had to do any pressers or interviews for season three.

He declined every invite by Darius and Sammy to hang out. He'd like to say it was because he was so busy lately, but that's simply not the case. It's not that he didn't want to see them or anything- he simply didn't want to run the risk of running into Kenji.

Ben just wanted to be left alone.

When the day came for their first table reads, Ben made sure to sit as far away from Kenji as possible. Not once did he look the taller teen's way, and as far as he knows, the treatment was reciprocated. The tension must have been obvious, because after they were done, Darius pulled him aside to talk.

“Ben, you doing okay? I wasn’t sure if something was wrong when you didn’t wanna come to Sammy’s barbeque, but I don’t think I’ve seen you look so haggard. None of us have seen or heard from you in weeks.”

“Just been busy.” He answers simply.

“And tired? Those bags under your eyes are huge.”

Ben hasn’t been able to sleep very well. When he tries, he relives that day in the green room, and he wakes up in a cold sweat. When he isn’t trying to sleep, things aren’t any better. Many times, he finds himself whispering that word Kenji used to describe him.

‘Freak’

He said it so often, it now sounds like a foreign word.

And immediately after, as if on queue, he thinks of the other word Kenji called him and starts lathering his arms with sanitizer.

Of course, he can’t exactly tell Darius this- not without telling him about what went on with him and the taller teen.

And despite how things ended, he made a promise to keep them a secret.

For all the good it did him.

Over the next few weeks, Darius keeps trying to get Ben to spill his guts, but when it's obvious that his efforts are in vain, he stops. Though, he tries to spend time with Ben as much as possible, finding reasons to hang out or just chill together. He knows what the other is doing, and he appreciates it, but if he's being honest, he isn't happier for it.

He's not sure when it happened, but it's like he isn't sure what to be happy about anymore. He wonders if it stems from some kind of fear of attachment, of being disappointed again.

Despite how he looks and feels, his performance hasn't been affected- Some of his best work is in season four of CC. Behind the scenes, he kept himself scarce, only doing the bare minimum of social interaction with the others.

He pointedly ignored Kenji. Which is fine, because the feeling was mutual.

They don't have a one on one conversation the entirety of filming for season four, and dialogue between their characters are scarce.

The writers made good on their hints the previous season, because Jenna and Ryan got together by the last episode. They thought it would be funny if Sean were the one to find out last and say a funny one liner.

Watching them kiss, even as characters on camera, was hard to watch. He thought he sufficiently prepared himself for it in the days leading up to the shoot, but when time came to film, he broke. However, Ben is a professional. He managed to give the director the reaction he wanted. Thankfully, they were able to do the scene in one take thus

sparing him from repeat viewings.

Except it didn't.

Later, after filming a particularly tiring action sequence, Ben meandered around the set, searching for a place to rest before his next scene. He didn't want to head all the way to his trailer, so he thought he'd catch a few Zs in a quiet corner somewhere.

From a force of habit, he headed to the spot he and Kenji usually hid to have some privacy.

There, he got a repeat performance of Jenna and Ryan's kiss- except this time, it wasn't in character. No, it was Kenji and Brooklynn, making out.

The pair of them were sharing a kiss where Kenji and Ben shared their first kiss, and dozens of subsequent kisses. After all that denial and posturing and vitriol he spewed at Ben for even suggesting they had something going on, Ben had him pegged- Kenji liked her, he's kissing her, and he even brought her to their spot.

Ben almost throws up.

Kenji notices him first. He immediately breaks away from the pink haired girl, his eyes wide in shock.

Ben ran away, as fast he could.

He makes it to the parking lot, then turns the corner. He hides in the side alley between the soundstages, where the trash bins are, not caring for once how filthy it is. Once there, he drops his ass to the ground and catches his breath. Even after his breathing returns to normal, he finds his heart is still racing.

That kiss he just witnessed sears itself into his memory more than the other one during filming. It wasn't acting. It was real.

As soon as Ben was out of the picture, Kenji moved on- to the pretty girl that he wanted, even before they broke up.

Ben wants to hate her. It would make things easier- to see her as some homewrecker and channel some of his anger towards her. But she isn't. She probably doesn't know about the two of them. She can't homewreck a home she knew nothing about. Ben doubts Kenji told her anything.

But that's what makes it worse.

The zipper on his fanny pack is stuck, and he grunts in annoyance as he tries to open it. When he finally manages it, he's devastated to find that his personal bottle of sanitizer is empty. In anger, he throws the thing against the far wall, the thing making a hollow noise- mocking him.

He doesn't realize it right away, but tears are spilling from his eyes. His face is hot, his head hurts from how hard he sobs, and his nose is running. It doesn't help that it's cold, December having started a few days ago. In lieu of sanitizer, he starts scratching at his arms, feeling utterly disgusting.

He tries to stop himself, to have some sense of dignity about this.

But he can’t. Ben didn’t even let himself cry after the breakup. He’s been holding it in for so long- all his sorrow, his resentment, his regret- and now it’s being released and it’s all too much. At the very least, he tries to sob quietly so as not to draw the attention of any passing crew.

He jumps when he feels someone’s arms wrapping around him. They hold him in a way, he can no longer scratch at his arms- which he now sees is covered in red from how hard he was going at it.

Through tearful eyes, he sees that it's Bumpy.

She doesn’t say a word. She only holds him, not leaving his side. Her arms are warm and envelope him completely, bringing him a warmth he didn’t realize he was craving. Ben leans into the touch, letting himself be consoled until his tears run dry.

And a long time after that as well.

After season four ended, Brooklynn and Kenji made their relationship public.

Everyone ate it up. They were in so many interviews and talk shows, appearing in magazines, and even plastered on a billboard paid for by the Jenna/Ryan fans. Ben couldn’t go a day without seeing them together somewhere.

A tiny voice inside him is happy that Kenji finally has a relationship that he can be openly happy with. A bitter part of him resents that it wasn't him.

Once again, he fills his freetime between seasons with bit parts and minor roles. Mae has been good about finding him auditions, though she insists he should be thinking about his next long term project. He considers this, and tells her he'd like to do something that would require him to leave California for a while.

He'll be turning 18 after season five ends, and his mom won't have to accompany him on set anymore. She's been wanting to return to Illinois for a while now, so one he has his independence and financial control of his money, he'll send her home and make sure to take care of her. Knowing her, she'll find a job and make herself busy, but if he can help it, he'll make sure she never has to worry about money ever again.

So, his next project has to be big, and hopefully, allow him to kill two birds with one stone.

He's grateful he has Darius and Bumpy to offer him support. He's more honest with Bumpy, since she's frank and isn't close with the cast. Darius has already guessed it has something to do with Kenji, but Ben hasn't revealed anything that would give him a better idea why.

Season Five begins production a few months later, and, for the first time since that day in the greenroom the year before, Kenji talks to him.

Unfortunately, it isn't pleasant.

There is no longer any warmth in Kenji's voice when he speaks to Ben.

He no longer calls him Seanny, and he acts as if speaking to him is an inconvenience. Ben, unappreciative of this turn, and tired of feeling sorry for himself, matches his tone and energy. Because of how much Sean and Ryan interact this season, they have to work together a lot. The jabs are not playful like they were when they were friends. These are more venomous and snappy. It's gotten to the point where they even do it while the others are there.

You'd think they were bitter exes or something.

Ben hates that it's like this now. Part of him wants to extend an olive branch, to get back on Kenji's good side. Just because they're no longer dating doesn't mean they have to be at each other's throats. Being friends would be better than nothing.

But another part, a jaded and hurt part of him, says 'screw that.' Ben didn't end things between them. Ben isn't the one who moved on immediately to the girl he denied having a thing for. Ben isn't the one who called the other a-

"Freak." Ben says aloud, not catching himself before it happens. He still does that from time to time, though less frequently than he did last year.

"What?" Yaz asks, the girl finding her mark next to him.

"Nothing. Just going over lines in my head." He lies. She quirks a brow at him, but drops it and doesn't say more. As it is, he still squeezes a good amount of sanitizer into his hand before the cameras continue to roll.

Filming for season five panned out much the same way- Kenji and Ben being passive aggressive towards one another, Ben ignoring group

hangouts, and mainly hanging around Darius and Bumpy.

Then, near the end of filming the season, and the show as a whole, did it come- The worst day of his time on Camp Cretaceous.

Oh, you thought the worst day already happened? Nah.

Kenji's dad being on set, or any of his assigned guardians, became unnecessary as Kenji finally turned 18. The others threw him a little party, to which Ben made himself scarce. Anyway, regardless of his son's supposed freedom, the man insists on being there anyway. Kenji always seems so annoyed by it, but judging from the fact he's still coming, the taller teen has yet to do anything about it.

Daniel Kon, through the years, has gotten worse and worse. What started out as underhanded comments and sly suggestions became outright demands and threats. He even started bringing his own personal bodyguards with him, as a sign of power. *He probably pays them with Kenji's money,* he thinks. The other guardians refuse to be near him unless he has something to say to their kid. Oh, Kenji tries to placate him, but many times, it serves to incense him further.

Why no one has called security (or even the cops) on him is beyond Ben.

Ben genuinely is concerned for Kenji's home life, despite everything. If he's like this in public, he must be a nightmare at home. Still, now that he's legally an adult, he can (and should, in his opinion) put his foot down or do something about him.

That has yet to happen.

He can't say he blames him. One of the things they bonded over early on was the fact they're being raised by single parents. Without his Dad, Kenji has no family left. So, in his mind, he's stuck with him for better or for worse. That said, it sucks for the rest of them.

Ben almost lost his cool on several occasions when he became way too much, but the adults and staff always seemed able to handle him. Even Ben's mom, the most average of average women, is able to handle the snark and belligerence of Daniel Kon.

Then, the man found someone who actually gave into him and let him walk all over them- Bumpy.

Now, officially, Bumpy's job is an assistant to the directing team. Generally, that extends to the crew at large, and she ends up doing a lot of gopher work. Anything else is her going above and beyond because she's kind and generous.

Well, Daniel has been exploiting this and making Bumpy do so many things for him like she's his personal toady. Now, Ben knows she can be headstrong and resilient, but for some reason, she's going alone with what he wants- like he has control over her.

When he asked her what was going on, she dodged his questions and did not offer much explanation. To Ben, as concerning as it is, if she's going along with it, maybe he shouldn't interfere. He might accidentally make it worse if he's not careful.

Then Daniel assaulted Bumpy.

The filming was done for the day, and most of the crew went home. It was a Kenji and Ben day, meaning they were the only ones who needed to come in to shoot. Mostly solo scenes, but the few scenes

they shared went about as well as you can expect at this point.

After a long day, Ben just wanted to go home and rest. However, after holding it in for an hour, he went to find a restroom before calling his mom. When he emerged, he heard shouting from nearby.

“Why didn’t you finish what I asked?! It’s already the end of shooting, it should have been done by now!” The unmistakable whine of Daniel carries in the mostly empty lot. The familiar voice of Bumpy joins his.

“Sorry, but I had other duties too. Besides, I did everything else from yesterday-”

A yelp from Bumpy has Ben out of the bathroom and approaching them.

Daniel apparently knocked down whatever things Bumpy had in her hands, equipment and documents spread on the ground. The girl is backed against a trailer and Daniel is crowding her, sneering as he does. Surprisingly, none of his bodyguards are around.

“I guess you don’t want me to pass that silly little script of yours to Masrani studios. With one word from me, I can make or break your budding career.”

Bumpy just hangs her head, her eyes glossed over. Let it be known that she is larger than Daniel, standing a good five inches taller and much bulkier than his slight frame. But between them, it’s clear who holds the power here.

The sight makes something snap in Ben.

He’s had enough of this man.

“Sir, I-”

“Get away from her!” Ben yells, catching both their attention.

“What- Ben.” Bumpy says in realization. “Don’t.” She warns.

“Listen to her, kid.” The man says with a nasty tone.

“I said,” Ben stands toe to toe with the man. He’s taller than Ben, but right now, Ben feels like he can do anything. “Get away from her.”

“You think you can tell me what to do, you disgusting little freak?” He snarls, not backing down from Ben either. “I can make or break your insignificant career, too.”

The words- two of them specifically- momentarily stun him. Just like he thought back then, Kenji must have been influenced by his father. Something definitely happened after that day behind the makeup tent.

But that’s not his concern right now. It’s Bumpy, who looks scared out of her mind.

“I’m not the one leeching off of my son’s success because I suck at my job. Who’s the insignificant one here?”

The man reels. For a moment, it seemed like Ben shamed him enough to back off, Daniel looking at him in shock more than anything. Then, the anger comes, and it's unleashed in an attempt to punch Ben in the face.

Ben easily dodges. The man, putting all his weight into it, falls forward and flat on his front.

No wonder this guy needs bodyguards. He's kind of… pathetic.

"Are you okay?" Ben turns his attention to Bumpy. The girl nods hesitantly.

Ben turns back to Daniel, who is groaning from his own stupidity.

Which, of course, is how Kenji and his father's bodyguard finds them.

"Dad?!" Kenji yells in concern. He helps the man up, but he brushes off his son's hands in irritation (and embarrassment) and dusts himself off.

Suddenly, Kenji turns his attention squarely on Ben and his face contorts into a snarl.

"Why did you hurt him?! What is wrong with you?!"

"I didn't do anything! He fell when he tried to hit me!"

“Yeah, right. You probably shoved him. He could have been seriously hurt!”

“He’s been taking advantage of Bumpy! And, I caught him assaulting her!”

“Lies!” Daniel protests. “We were talking when this freak came out of nowhere and jumped me!”

“You can't be serious-”

“Hey, what’s going on over here?” A loud, booming voice asks, cutting off their conversation. Two of the studio security wander over to them.

Immediately, all of them start talking over one another, trying to tell their version of what happened. The security guards, annoyed, have them all come to the office to go over everything being said. An hour later, and they’re nowhere near a resolution.

Daniel insists they call the police, which is the last thing Ben wants. Ben says they should look over the security footage, which he’s sure would back him up. Kenji and the bodyguard try to placate Daniel, but don’t deny anything that he’s accusing Ben of. Then there’s Bumpy, who sits quietly and looks downcast.

Eventually, Ben’s mom shows up after he called her, and things don’t get better. Daniel starts berating her, and Ben nearly snaps again.

“I’m telling you, this little freak-”

“Call me that again, asshole! See what happens!” Ben nearly launches himself at the man, who scrambles back in fear. The security guards stop him. Not willing to put up with him, they lock him in one of their rooms, separating him from the others.

He bangs on the door, upset at the treatment. Why are they locking him up? After a few minutes, with nothing to show for his efforts, he takes a seat on the ground and sighs heavily. He’s not sure how much time passes, but after sitting there alone for far too long, the door unlocks and someone joins him in there.

It’s Kenji, of all people.

“What do *you* want?” Ben snaps.

“Hey, cut the snark.” Kenji returns. He sighs then shakes his head. “I convinced my Dad not to involve the cops.”

“I’m the one who should be calling the cops.” Ben rolls his eyes.

“Maybe, but he *is* hurt and that’s the only reason the security guards are even listening to him. Your mom-”

“Is she okay?” Ben asks, concerned.

“Yeah, she was pretty upset when they put you in here, but she’s just sitting with Bumpy now.”

“And… how’s Bumpy?”

“The one you should be worried about is *you*, Ben.” Kenji snaps, his brow furrowed. “Why are you so violent lately-”

“I told you, I didn’t do anything to him!” Ben snaps back.

“So you didn’t try to jump him twenty minutes ago? Back in that room?”

“That was because he-”

“Ben! Stop!” Kenji insists, his voice exasperated.

Ben just frowns and crosses his arms, glaring at the taller teen. His expression isn’t any better, but if Ben were being generous, he’d think he was actually concerned about him.

Kenji takes a step towards him. Instinctively, Ben backs up.

“How-” Kenji stops himself. He looks away before finishing his thought. “How have you been?”

Oh, he cannot be serious.

Somewhere, deep in Ben’s soul, there is still a part that is touched by his concern. Somewhere, he’s happy that he cares enough to ask at all. Somewhere, he’s glad to see he isn’t talking to him snarkily anymore,

at least in this moment.

But all of that is drowned out by the absolute disdain Ben has grown for the guy over the past year, and he's going to make sure Kenji knows it.

"Fine." Ben answers curtly.

"You sure? You haven't been-"

"I said I'm fine."

"Alright. Did you need me to-"

"Why are you talking to me like we're friends?" Ben cuts him off. "This is the nicest you've been to me in ages. Why?" Kenji almost looks hurt by his words, but Ben can't find it in him to care.

"I'm just asking-"

"Because I don't like it."

"What? You-"

"I don't want to hear you talk to me like that ever again. We both know how you really feel, and I don't need false hope again."

For a moment, Kenji looks conflicted. His jaw is tight and his eyes hold Ben's own. His hands seem to shake- why that is, Ben doesn't know. If Ben had to guess, he'd assume Kenji is debating if he wants to keep this up, or go back to the way they have been recently.

When Kenji's face relaxes and his eyes show no warmth, Ben knows which he picked.

"Don't worry. Once we finish CC, we don't ever have to talk to each other again."

With that, Kenji leaves. He leaves the door ajar, to which Ben assumes he's been allowed to go as well. To his surprise, he isn't hearing a peep from Daniel, who he assumed would still be screaming. The second he pokes his head out, his mom and Bumpy hug him. He laughs as he calms them down, but he peeks over their shoulders to see what's going on.

Kenji, along with his Dad and bodyguard, already left. The only ones remaining are the three of them and the security guards. One of them approaches them.

"We got the footage, and you were telling the truth."

"Told you."

"Ben." His mom chastises.

"Your friend decided not to press charges, so the others left. Though, from what we can tell, you also have the right to press charges."

Oh. Huh.

Ben contemplates this. If he nails Daniel for assault and attempted battery, they might also be able to uncover his past misdeeds- specifically, what he's done to Kenji. No matter how things ended up between them, he hated that Kenji lived in fear of his own dad for so long. But then, that would mean putting Kenji through more unpleasantness. That would mean breaking Kenji's trust.

Why shouldn't you? He's already broken your trust. You're gonna pass by a billboard that proves he doesn't deserve this loyalty from you. Heck, he literally just told you he doesn't want anything to do with you when the show is finished. What do you owe him?

Despite all of those thoughts, Ben just shakes his head.

"No. It's done."

None of them question him for making that decision. Even if they did, Ben wouldn't have felt inclined to share his reasoning.

For Ben, that was the last act of kindness he'd show Kenji.

The 'Incident' happened weeks ago, and as far as Ben can tell, no one besides those involved knew it even happened. Ben didn't see Daniel for the rest of filming, and Kenji, from what limited attention Ben afforded the teen, seemed happier.

Whatever. It's none of his business anymore.

Camp Cretaceous wrapped neatly, and everyone was happy with what they accomplished on the show. In addition to Ryan and Jenna becoming canon, Raini and Kausar have also become official- becoming one of the first teen media to have a canon lesbian couple.

Ben did wonder if the writers would finish the set and sneak a Paul/ Sean romance in at the end, but alas, no such luck. It's just as well. Ben would want his first queer role as leading man or something, not some afterthought thrown in by writers for brownie points.

Just like the previous season, Mae got Ben out of interview duties. He couldn't avoid the big ones, where all of them are expected to be present, but Mae made it up to him- She was able to secure him an audition for a streaming service's summer action movie. To his delight, the film will be shooting in Brazil.

He has no idea what life is like in Brazil, but the idea of spending months working there, away from all of this, is the biggest draw.

Ben's 18th birthday came, and per his request, the CC cast didn't have a party for him. They did send things like flowers and gifts to his apartment, to which Ben accepted gratefully. He did note that he didn't receive anything from Kenji, though, he didn't expect to.

And despite it being his birthday, he had a present for his mom.

When he got control over his own money, he was surprised to find the tidy sum that his mother was able to save. He was by no means being paid a paltry amount for his work, but he didn't think she'd have so much saved. Ben is no math expert, but he figures that other than the necessities for them to live, she didn't spend a dime.

So he did what he promised to do- buy her a house and let her move back home to Illinois.

At first, she refused, saying he should spend the money on himself- without blowing it all in one go, of course. But Ben insisted. Granted, the house is a relatively small 2 bedroom in Berwyn, but it's new and it's affordable and close enough to Chicago that his mom could go back to her old job.

Eventually, she accepted. Then, she saw him off when he left for Brazil.

Ben was able to keep in relatively normal contact with everyone- sans the obvious exception- but, over time, they all grew busy and the group chat fell apart. He still talked to them from time to time, but the ones he kept in closest contact with were Bumpy and Darius.

Since his time on CC, Ben made it a point not to have social media. At first, it was so he didn't have the pressure of keeping up appearances online, and so people didn't have such easy access to him. Of course, another perk was he could limit his exposure to a certain celebrity couple. As he grew older, he was thankful for his choice. Still, the only way he gets any celebrity news or gossip is through the TV, but he's fine with that.

It also meant he limited how much he might see Kenji.

If he found out Kenji would attend the same red-carpet event, Ben didn't go. Hell, if he found out Kenji was staying at the same hotel, Ben would cancel his reservation. He of course wasn't able to block him out completely, but from what control he did have, he thinks he did alright.

Of course, any accidental exposure triggered him badly, needing his sanitizer or getting that itch. It got to the point where he finally decided he needed professional help. Doctor Sarah Harding has been an immense help, and despite eventually overcoming his ticks and no longer carrying sanitizer with him everywhere, he has her on speed dial, just in case.

Ben's career only grew and grew. Gone were the days of commercials and one-line roles. He started doing more films and big budget series. Heck, he's garnered a name for himself in the voice-acting biz. As time went on, his days on Camp Cretaceous simply became memories he treasures or loathes. In either case, both sets of memories are seared into his heart.

Then, one night, he got a fateful call from Mae about a new role…

-Present-

Going over all of that was physically taxing for Ben. Not only was the story long- but essentially reliving those emotional and painful moments wasn't something he thought he'd be doing tonight. That said, he feels a sense of relief that someone other than Bumpy knows.

The entire time Ben was regaling this tale, Darius was suspiciously quiet. Ben isn't sure if it was because he was focusing, bored, or upset. When he caught him up to the present, Darius released a big sigh.

If you're wondering, Ben still omitted everything about Daniel abusing Kenji. He isn't sure Kenji ever told their friend about what he went through, so Ben made sure he wasn't the one to spill.

"Thank you for finally telling me, Ben."

"I know you've been curious for years."

They sit there for a moment, the heaviness between them since disappeared. Still, the lack of reaction, and follow up questions for that matter, leaves Ben feeling anxious. Darius clears his throat, and Ben braces himself for what he's about to say.

"Can... Can I tell you something?"

"Of course, man."

"Kenji told me to never tell anyone... but for a good while after Camp ended, he lived with me and my family."

"What? Really?"

"He had no where to go, apparently. We had an extra room, and he and Brand got on great, so it wasn't bad or anything. I was... I guess I was hoping that your story would explain why he needed our help, but all of that was..."

"Oh. Sorry, I- I don't know."

This is news to Ben. Kenji hasn't told him about it since reuniting, and this is the first Darius has ever mentioned it- and the two of them have been in contact the whole time. Still, not wanting to prod too much, especially since this was apparently a secret Kenji wanted to keep, Ben doesn't ask anything to follow up.

“I… I never knew about any of this, though." Darius continues. "I don’t think any of us did. Even Brooklynn.”

“You don’t think Kenji told her?”

“I talk to her pretty often, and she’d sometimes ask if Kenji ever talked to me about some of this stuff. Though, who knows? Those two dated for years.”

“Hmm. I guess it doesn’t matter now.” Ben sighs tiredly, exhausted from regaling Darius of the past eight years.

“I really can’t believe he did all that stuff…” Darius muses darkly. Ben notices the shift in demeanor, and he’s quick to speak up.

“It was bad at the time, but we were both kids. Besides, he’s apologized and I’ve forgiven him. We’re fine now.”

“Are you?” Darius asks pointedly.

“What?”

“Are you fine? The two of you?”

“Yeah? I told you earlier- we’re ‘more than better.’” Ben sneaks a look at Kenji, who has since moved on from the crab puffs to eating an ungodly amount of shrimp cocktail while the girls watch him in interest.

“I’m happy for you, really. But, since you’re both out and Kenji and Brooklynn are officially broken up, why not come out with your relationship publicly?”

“Well, you saw how a lot of people reacted to just the idea of us.” Ben returns his attention to the man sitting next to him. He knows that was a bit defensive. He’s just not sure what Darius is getting at here. “They hounded me and accused me of being a homewrecker. I don’t want to go through that again.”

“So, what- You’ll continue hiding? For how long? And in the meantime, you put yourself back into the position that put a strain on your relationship the first time around?”

Darius does not mince words. At least, not when he’s upset, and Ben can’t figure out why he would be.

“Geez, even Bumpy isn’t this direct with me.” Ben mumbles. Though, the other man’s words resonate with him- He is putting himself in a less-than-ideal situation again, only this time, he’s the instigator. “I… I know. You’re right of course. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad about it.” Darius sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You know what’s best for you. That was just… a lot of information to process.”

“Well, you *did* ask.” Ben reminds him, to which Darius smiles.

“I did. Thank you for telling me. Again.”

“You’re one of my best friends, D. I should have told you a long time ago.”

“Well, you aren’t the only one. Kenji wouldn't tell me about it either.”

‘One day, I’ll tell you.’ Kenji’s words ring in his mind once again.

Maybe it’s because he bared his soul to Darius tonight and went over most of what happened, but Ben feels more curious than ever to what Kenji meant by that. What is it that he wants to tell him? Does it have to do with their past like Ben thinks?

Despite how tired he is- despite how hearing it will most likely make him feel, Ben wants to know.

So, he’s going to ask Kenji, maybe as soon as they get back to his penthouse.

Whenever he does it, he hopes it won't be another exhausting experience. Though, likely, it'll break his heart all over again.

Chapter End Notes

Heather by Conan Gray

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading! And for making it this far (15k words)! And sorry for postponing this three times lol

This whole messy scenario was one of the first things I knew I was going to include in this AU. I also knew I wanted to link it to **Heather by Conan Gray**, specifically for the line, *'I still remember the 3rd of December'* 12/03/2021 btw was the release date of Season 4 of Camp Cretaceous, and the anniversary of Brooklynn/ Kenji becoming a thing (in the real world, not canon)

Countless times, I contemplated breaking all this up as flashbacks in separate chapter as I have been, but I really wanted it to be whole to get the full effect. After the next chapter, flashbacks will be set in Post-Camp/Pre-Film Meeting.

I hope you enjoyed the meta-pain lol I personally love how this all lined up

Next chapter (which will be Kenji's POV of all this) should be out by Wednesday, 2/15! don't quote me on that tho
EDIT: I'm so sorry about the long wait for the next chapter! I've been very busy with work and other obligations, but I've had

some free time recently to keep working on it lol I will try and aim for Friday, 3/10! Look forward to it!
Edit: So sorry again for the delay! I didn't know it was Spring Break, so I had to watch my nephew all of this past week lol I had barely any time to myself, let alone work tbh. I'll aim for Tuesday, 3/21! Sorry again!

Lonely

Chapter Summary

Kenji reveals to Ben the reason for his actions when they were younger

Chapter Notes

cw// child abuse, mild language, mild violence, mild homophobia

Hello! I'm so sorry this took so long! Here's another long flashback chapter! Hope you enjoy!

Kenji POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ben has been acting a little strange lately.

If Kenji didn't know him as well as he does, he might have missed the signs- messing up an easy line when filming, not paying attention when they talk, or, most troublingly, walking into closed doors. Ben, like everyone else, has off days. But considering how long this particular spell is lasting, it's starting to become a concern.

He asked Darius if he knows anything, but the other said he doesn't have any idea. Kenji knows Darius, too- the guy definitely knows more than he's letting on. He just isn't sharing it with Kenji. Also, and maybe he's off base here, but he gets the feeling Darius is kind of… *upset* with him? A little? He wasn't unfriendly or anything, but he's been keeping their conversations, even the ones not about Ben, brief and to the point.

Normally Kenji would be on that as well, trying to figure out what D's problem is, but he already has his plate full dealing with his boyfriend.

After a long day of filming, Ben stayed the night at Kenji's place with plans on having another 'day out' in the morning. Kenji specifically planned this so it would align with the break in filming they have. The timing of all this is perfect- maybe a day of bumming around and having fun is what Ben needs to snap out of whatever funk he's in.

Kenji was excited, as he had several activities planned for them. But, as they were heading out the door, Ben completely spaced out as he was asking him where he wanted to have breakfast.

"Babe? C'mon, if you don't pick, I'm gonna take us to Waffle Manor and make you share a super-chocolate deluxe with me." Kenji playfully threatens.

"Sounds great." Ben responds absentmindedly.

Okay, now Kenji *knows* something is wrong. Ben hates chocolate- says he prefers carob or berries- but waffles covered in it 'sounds great?' *Nah, enough is enough.*

Without another word, Kenji tugs on Ben's jacket and leads the taller man back into the penthouse. The other struggles against him, protesting lightly, but he seems more confused than anything. Kenji intends to get to the bottom of this right now.

He sits himself down on the couch and Ben does the same, though with a look of annoyance.

"Geez, what was that about? What's wrong?"

“That’s my line.” Kenji replies. “You’ve been out of it for days now.”

“Have I?” Ben says unconvincingly. Kenji must give him a disbelieving look, because he continues. “Well, filming has been kind of stressful. Wu has been up my butt lately.”

“That’s only been happening because you’ve been out of it. It started after Yaz’s party.” He points out. "Did something happen?"

That night, Ben and Darius had found some secret corner and talked the whole evening- or so that’s what Brooklynn tells him. She saw the pair chatting, and though she wanted to put her feet up and join them, she decided against it when she noticed how serious they looked.

After the party, Ben went home with him. They had a little fun in his room (wink), but it was afterwards when he noticed something wasn't right.

He caught Ben staring at him with a distant look in his eyes. When he asked him what was wrong, the taller man blustered and said it was nothing. Since then, he’s caught Ben doing it a few times- on top of all the distracted antics.

“You noticed, huh.” Ben states, not asks. “I was gonna ask you that night, after the party, but… I chickened out. I haven’t found the right time to try again.”

“Ask? Ask me what?”

What question could Ben have that has him losing focus on set? And walking into doors? And potentially eating chocolate? And, why does

Kenji get the feeling he isn't going to like what it is?

Ben sighs, then his eyes meet Kenji's.

"You… you said you'd tell me one day." Ben gulps. "That day behind the makeup station. I- I didn't get what you meant at the time, but I'm guessing you meant you were going to tell me your reasons for what happened between us."

Oh.

At the time, Kenji wasn't sure Ben even heard him, so he hasn't given much thought to when he'd finally come clean. Though, Ben has been known to observe minute details, so he should have figured he'd both hear and *remember* his cryptic promise.

Honestly, he isn't looking forward to this conversation. He wants to have it- he promised Ben, and himself, that he would. But, the thought of reliving that time in his life is not going to be a pleasant time for either of them.

It's then that Kenji notices that, for the first time in a while, Ben doesn't look so distracted. That look has been replaced by one of determination- probably to finally hear this long-overdue tale of Kenji's. It's enough to convince him that, even if it'll suck, he needs to follow through.

"You're right, of course. That's what I meant I'd tell you."

"Okay." Ben says, relief in his voice. "Um, we don't have to do it *now*. Why don't we go to Waffle Manor and-"

“I don’t think I wanna talk about it in public. And, if we don’t talk about it now, I’m not sure I’ll find the courage again later.” Kenji admits. “Though I’m, uh, not sure where to start.”

Ben contemplates this, staring off at nothing as he does. Kenji shifts in his seat, trying and failing to get comfortable. In all likelihood, he won’t be comfortable no matter what he does for the foreseeable future.

“Maybe from when your dad caught us behind the costume tent?” Ben pipes up.

“Oh?”

“That’s… when you started treating me different.”

Right.

“Okay.”

Before he says anything else, Kenji stands and removes his coat. Ben does the same, and the two settle in on Kenji’s couch. The pair sit facing one another, both their legs pulled up and brushing each other on the cushions. There’s hardly any room, but Kenji finds the close proximity comforting. He clears his throat, then finally speaks.

“So, after he found us, I had to shoot a couple more scenes. I was so worked up, I ended up doing several takes for that first one alone. My dad was watching off to the side, which didn’t help, but somehow I

pulled through.”

Ben doesn’t reply, but nods his head. Kenji gets the feeling that this is going to be less of a conversation and more of Kenji telling a story. With that in mind, he swallows the growing lump in his throat, and presses on.

-six years ago-

Kenji hates it when it’s quiet.

Sure, he enjoys peaceful moments as much as the next guy, but in his experience, quiet typically precedes something unpleasant. It’s true in horror movies and games. It’s true during thunderstorms. And, unfortunately, it’s true when it comes to his dad.

The entire drive back home was spent in silence. Not a single stray cough or sniffle was uttered in that car. After they parked, the ride up the elevator to their apartment was stifling, and still, not a single word was said. It wasn’t until the door closed behind his dad, and both of them stood in the entryway, did either of them speak.

“Dad, I-”

The man takes a menacing step towards him, and Kenji immediately shuts his mouth.

“What were you doing with that boy?” His voice is low and even, which means he is beyond mad. When he’s only *kind of* upset, he’ll yell or complain. But, as Kenji has been finding out as of late, his dad’s *true* anger comes in the form of a soft voice dripping in venom.

“He- He was upset about our filming schedule and hugged me cuz he was feeling bad.” Kenji lies. Kenji is a great actor, but he's never been a good *liar,* and he knows he hasn’t improved because his dad’s expression does not change.

“That’s *not* what I saw.”

“W-what do you mean?”

“You hugged *him.* And from what little I heard, you two *weren’t* talking about filming.”

“You heard? What else did-”

Two loud snaps echo in the entryway. Kenji’s hands instinctively clench and his back straightens. His dad started doing this when Kenji first started his acting career. When he was younger, he had a hard time keeping focus on sets, and normally the directors were understanding. Of course, it irritated his dad to no end. He’d snap his fingers to get his attention and tell him to do the scene correctly. Since then, it’s become a quick, non-verbal way to make Kenji pay attention.

Kenji *hates* the sound.

“Answer me honestly, son. Why did you hug him?” The man says slowly.

Is… Is this a test? Is Kenji supposed to *actually* tell him? Does he already know- did he hear something that implies he and Ben’s real relationship?

“Well?”

“I hugged him because he was sad. We haven’t hung out together lately.” Kenji replies half heartedly. It helps that it’s true, though *certain* bits of information were not included.

“It upset him so much that you hugged him? Why would that be?” His dad crosses his arms.

Kenji has been dreading this. He *isn’t* ashamed of being with Ben- the other is thoughtful, caring, and stubbornly loyal. They have fun together and get along well. Not to mention, Ben is adorable. Sometimes they argue and irritate each other, but it’s all in good fun, and in the end, they only get under each other’s skin because they care so much about one another. He's honestly so lucky to have him.

But admitting to his dad the simple truth that he has a *boyfriend* terrifies him like nothing else.

It was brief, but Kenji glimpsed at Ben before he left today, and what he saw nearly broke his heart. Ben, who looked on as Kenji walked away from him, seemed distraught- probably at what being caught means for them, and also for what Kenji is currently going through. The mental image conjures the tiniest spark of defiance emerges within him. Instead of backtracking and doing damage control, he chooses to latch onto that feeling and say what he *needs* to.

“Because Ben is my boyfriend.” He replies, his voice surprisingly even.

His dad’s frown deepens at his words.

“Boyfriend? Son, you’re too young to be dating anyone, let alone some *boy.”* The man’s voice is dismissive, almost exasperated as well.

“He’s not just ‘some boy.’ Besides, you were okay with me and Brooklynn going on a date.” Kenji points out.

Kenji, in his heart, knows that day at the cafe wasn’t a date, but the man doesn’t know that, and judging from his reaction so far, he’s not sure he wants to set the record straight. As it is, the sass earns him a steely look.

“What happened with that, by the way? How did you go from going on a date with a beautiful girl to dating… Ben?”

“I like Ben more.” Kenji replies simply.

“So you admit, you *do* like that Brooklynn girl.”

The way his dad picks apart his words and twists them to his own meaning, and suspecting him of the same thing Ben admitted to earlier, nearly has Kenji reeling. The way it makes him feel- uncomfortable and itchy- is much the same as well.

“Well, we’re *friends,* but-”

“So why not focus on *her* instead?” His dad insists. “I still think you’re too young for a relationship, but better her than him. Why go through some messy phase?”

“It’s not a phase. I have feelings for Ben and he-”

“Kenji, please. You don’t ‘have feelings’ for him. You’re confusing friendship with romance.”

“I’m not!” Kenji cries. “He's cute and sweet, and we’ve kissed loads of times. And, we’ve-”

Kenji shuts up once again when his father closes what remaining distance there is between them, the man practically standing on his feet. After a growth spurt in middle school, Kenji has shot up past his dad in height, but the man always has a way of making him feel smaller- like he's still a young kid. The man's expression alone would make him want to shrivel up into a ball on the ground.

“Do not bring up whatever disgusting things you’ve done with that freak, Kenji.” His dad warns. “I see now. *He’s* the one corrupting you. If he *wasn’t around,* everything would be fine.”

“W-what?” Kenji sputters.

“It will take some doing, but I bet I can have him written out of your show. I have *just* enough pull with the studio's head to arrange it.”

Oh, no.

Being in Camp Cretaceous means everything to Ben. It's his first 'real gig' and he takes pride in the show and his character. Sure, the boy has had some complaints about his character's diminishing role as of late, but it comes from a place of love. He's worked hard with all of them for years, and the idea of Ben being cast aside on his dad's whim is too much to contemplate.

It *cannot* happen.

"You can't do tha-"

"Excuse me? I can't? I assure you, I can and I will." His dad sneers, a cruel smirk on his face. "Well, I suppose I don't *have* to. You just need to **stay away** from him from now on."

Kenji's stomach drops even further. If he had eaten anything today, he's sure he'd be doubling over from how suddenly ill he feels.

This can't be happening. His dad can't really mean that. He can't expect Kenji to just stay away from his own boyfriend.

"No. I can't. He's my boyfr-"

A hand is raised, and on instinct, Kenji flinches.

To his surprise, the blow never comes.

When he looks at his dad, the man still has his hand above him, but he looks as if he's holding himself back. This is the first time he hasn't followed through. Lucky him.

Yes, it isn't lost on Kenji how messed up that is.

After a moment, the man lowers his hands behind his back, and stares at Kenji like he's just another one of his toadies from work- with annoyance and impatience. Unfortunately, Kenji has been the recipient of this gaze more and more lately.

"Whatever it is you two have- it's *done*. If I catch you two interacting beyond what is necessary for work, he's gone. Are we clear?"

No.

Nonononono.

He's supposed to choose between his relationship and his boyfriend's career? If he picks the latter, they won't even *be* boyfriends anymore. Ben is one of the few good things in his life right now. He's been a source of strength and comfort and he can't just give up what they have.

He can't lie to Ben and say he doesn't have feelings for him anymore.

But if he doesn't, he'll be cosigning Ben's removal from the show- something Ben takes enormous pride and joy from.

Why does *Kenji* have to make this choice? Why is his dad *making* him make it? This isn't fair!

...

The person this is the most unfair to is Ben, however. He doesn't know his fate rests in Kenji's hands right now. And no matter what decision he comes to, Ben will certainly not be happy.

Kenji decides right there: even if it breaks his heart, and Ben's, he has to pick the other's career over them being together. Ben can find someone else- someone better for him. If he's pulled from the show, who knows what trajectory his life will take.

He doesn't say a word and simply nods his head, his mood unquestionably dour. In contrast, his dad seems delighted by his answer. The immediate shift in both their demeanors is insane- Kenji is upset and his dad is happy.

"Good. I'm glad you see it my way. You'll see, this is all for the best."

His dad puts an 'assuring' hand on his shoulder as he walks past him, and the gesture feels like an immense weight is suddenly put on him. His dad continues down the hall, and it isn't until he hears his bedroom door close does Kenji finally breathe.

He continues to just stand there. He isn't sure how long he does, but after a while, he meanders to his own room, and locks the door. Instead of lying down in his oversized bed, he slumps against the door, and sits on the floor, unmoving.

Once again, he isn't sure how long he will stay there.

All he knows is this nothing about this is going to be easy. For him or for Ben.

Kenji would like to think he's pretty self aware. He knows his strengths and he knows his weaknesses- even the things he dare not admit.

So, Kenji knows for a fact that if Ben were to contact him, to check in after what happened or to just talk, he might break his own resolve. So, he does the sensible thing- delete the contact and block the number.

…what? He's thorough. Remove temptation and all that.

He feels bad- of course he does. But, if he's going to pacify his dad and convince him they don't have anything going on anymore, he can't be caught texting him. He doubts the man would be understanding even if it were through their group chat- something else he has to avoid. If he has to talk to any of the others, he'll just DM them.

Besides, if things with his dad get better, and maybe even get to the point where he can accept him being with Ben, he can just unblock him. It's not like he's going to lose Ben's number or anything.

As luck would have it, Kenji doesn't have to be back on set the next day. He uses this break in his schedule to prepare himself for the next time he runs into Ben.

He's not sure how to approach this- should he outright tell him of his dad's threat? Ben would probably try to fight it, and he may even confront the man directly. That doesn't sound like a good idea. Maybe he should just keep busy- ignore the other as much as possible. Granted, the last time he did that- while he was prepping for all the new things coming in season four- Ben confronted him then as well. Same problem as telling him directly.

So… does that leave him only the *worst* possible option? To break up with Ben? How would he even do that? Is he supposed to say he doesn't feel the same anymore, that they're too busy to have a relationship, that he doesn't want to have to hide and he'll have to if he's with him?

Or, does he do the cruelest thing possible… and tell Ben he feels something for someone else?

Yeah, Kenji is seriously considering the 'nuclear option'.

Kenji genuinely likes Brooklynn. She's a great friend and is an all-around amazing and talented person. Not to mention, she's really cute. Honestly, if he and Ben weren't together, he might have tried asking her out.

Ben is justified in thinking Kenji feels something for her, and Kenji has felt guilty for it. He was surprised when the other brought it up the other day, but he should have known he'd have picked up on it.

Despite this, Kenji meant what he said to his father- He likes *Ben*

more. He wouldn't trade what they have for anything. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't betray him like that. But he might *have* to imply that he would if it means keeping the other from confronting him or his dad.

The day Kenji was supposed to return to set, he stayed home. He dreaded to think how badly it would affect Ben to break up so harshly. Call him a coward, but Kenji thought by feigning a cold, he could delay his plan. He thought he could keep Ben, whose number is still blocked by the way, as his boyfriend for one day longer.

The next day, his father insisted he go. So he did.

Once again, Kenji's cowardice won out. He pretended like nothing was wrong, and acted the way he normally would. He just spent as much time focusing on work as he could. It's the perfect excuse to avoid Ben, and by extension, avoiding breaking up. Of course, focusing on work means spending a whole lot of time with Brooklynn.

It's a miracle no one else noticed the forlorn looks Ben gives him every chance he gets. Whenever he was chatting with the pink-haired girl, he could practically feel the other's eyes on him.

Kenji would have liked nothing better than to run to the other and hold him close- telling him everything will be alright. But everything *won't* be alright- not when Kenji finds the will to go through with his plan.

It certainly doesn't help that his dad is once again spending a lot of his time on set. He says that work isn't as busy so he can chaperone more often. A lie, most likely. He probably wants to make sure Kenji keeps up his end of the deal.

To his surprise, Ben never once confronted him. The other also focused on filming. He started practicing stunts so diligently, the two hardly saw each other outside of scenes they shared. He'd like to think it's because the other is thoughtful enough to *realize* Kenji is in a pickle with his dad- which, of course, just weighs on his mind more and more. But a small, niggling part of him wonders if he simply didn't *care* enough to check in with him.

Before anyone knew it, their grueling film schedule was finally over and season three wrapped.

And still, Kenji hasn't broken up with Ben yet. He always found some excuse not to go through with it. His dad hadn't given him any more trouble since he's been avoiding the other, so he hasn't felt pressure to follow through.

It got to the point where a crazy thought persisted in his mind- maybe… they *don't* have to break up?

They only have two seasons left to film. That'll take a little over a year. By the time season five wraps, Kenji will already be 18. He'll be free from the constraints of his father, both domestically and financially, and can do whatever he wants- and *be* with whoever he wants.

He won't be able to use his threat against Ben to make him obey anymore.

But… what kind of relationship do they even *have* now?

Because of Kenji, they haven't said ten sentences to each other in a month- in character, notwithstanding. Kenji may be doing all he can to avoid him, but Ben hasn't exactly been fighting to see him. They've

also been extremely busy- too busy to have done all that much even without his dad watching them like a hawk. They'd have to hide for a while- neither of them ready to come out and have that aspect of themselves be attached to their careers. As much as Kenji loves their stolen moments, grateful they were able to even do that much, he starts to wonder if it was ever enough.

He wouldn't have to hide if he were with a girl… if he were with *Brooklynn.*

'I'm jealous. I don't get to be with you alone anymore, but she does. And when you're with her, you don't have to hide, like we are now…'

You're a real piece of work, Kon.

But one should remember: Kenji is a seventeen year old who's afraid of the future. He's just trying to make the best of a bad situation, as cliche as that sounds.

Maybe breaking up *is* for the best, in the long run. For both of them.

Since the season has finished filming, promotional work has begun. Meaning, he and the other cast members have to do interviews for news outlets to promote the new season. Typically, they either do them all together, individually, or in pairs.

Today, he and Ben are handling the press junket. Fortunately, his father is finally too busy at work to join him, leaving Hawkes to be his babysitter for the day. Small blessings and all that.

The interviews went about as well as they could. He and Ben just answer the same questions over and over, slightly tweaking stories and anecdotes to keep things from becoming repetitive. The last interview was interesting at least, but halfway through, Ben started to space out. And, it wasn't a tired or bored kind of spaced out- more like a *distracted or upset* kind.

In either case, it meant Kenji had to pick up the slack. Normally that'd be no problem, but Kenji is exhausted, mentally and physically, from everything going on. Once the makeup artist cleaned them up and left, Kenji made sure to lock the door behind them.

In his mind, he realizes this is the first time they've been alone in ages- a thought that gives him pause.

A part of him wants to walk up to Ben and kiss him- something he hasn't been able to do for a while. God, he wants to kiss this boy so much.

Part of him wants to talk- since they've practically been apart this whole time, and catching up sounds rather nice. Ben probably would welcome the conversation.

But the scared part of Kenji, one who wants to heed his dad's threats in order to protect Ben, thinks this is the perfect opportunity to go through with his plan and get it over with.

So, instead of kissing him or embracing him or talking to him, like a boyfriend *should,* he chooses to come at Ben with annoyance.

“What’s up with you, Seanny?”

“Nothing.” The other replies quickly.

“Really? Cuz you definitely spaced out at the end there. Eric looked so confused, and frankly, he’s not alone.”

“I’m fine. Just… tired.”

“Bull.” Kenji insists. “Remember? I’ve used that excuse before.”

“Look, can you drop it?” Ben’s eyes meet his, a look of pleading behind them. “This is the first conversation we’ve had in a while and I don’t want it to just be us arguing.”

Kenji feels a twinge of guilt at his words. Ben’s right. The first words out of his mouth were accusatory- not something a boyfriend should do.

But right now, he’s put himself in a mood and he just can’t stop himself from keeping this attitude up.

“I’m not *arguing,* I’m just asking why you’re so off today.” he says defiantly.

Ben considers this, not saying anything right away. Then, he looks Kenji straight in the eyes again, seeming to have gathered his courage,

and opens his mouth.

“What happened after you went home?”

Ah.

Kenji knows exactly what he’s talking about. He should have expected this question. After all, he blocked the other’s number and hasn’t taken the time to explain himself. But, as he was on the offensive seconds ago, he tries to steer the conversation back in his favor.

“What-”

“That day I showed up on set.” Ben clarifies, which isn’t needed. “You looked so scared when you left, I was so worried. I tried calling you, but-”

“Don’t change the subject. We were talking about *you.”*

“Kenji.” Ben insists. *“Please.* I want to know if you’re alright. You didn’t come back right away, so-”

“I had a cold. I told you that already.” He interrupts. Ben’s words shame him, and hearing how worried he was isn’t making this any easier.

“Bull.” Ben parrots his own words back to him. In any other situation, he’d have found that endearing, but as he’s losing control of this conversation, he can’t help but get even more annoyed.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Kenji averts his eyes, finding the calm blue of Ben’s, that he normally loves to get lost in, more piercing than anything.

Ben takes a step towards him, his voice growing louder.

“Did your dad-”

No, Seanny. Don’t bring him into this. Otherwise, this will get out of hand.

“I said,” Kenji yells. “I don’t want to talk about it!”

Ben physically recoils from him. He’s never yelled at him before- never out of character, anyway. They’ve had a few spats over the years, but neither of them have ever lost their cool like he just did. He can tell Ben is still worried, but there’s a hint of fear mixed in his emotions as well.

“Kenji…” Ben tries, but he shakes his head at the shorter teen.

“Just let it go.” He repeats calmly, able to reign himself in a bit.

“Okay. As long as you’re okay…” Ben goes soft at the end, defeat clear in his voice.

Kenji hates this. At this point, he considers confessing to everything- to let him know what they're up against and that it might be for the best to break up, maybe even just for a little while. It would be hard, but with some patience and luck, they can finish the show and no longer have to fear the repercussions of being together.

Well, at least as far as his dad is concerned.

He's thought about it a lot in the last few weeks, and as much as he cares about Ben, he cares about his image and his career as well. People are more accepting of queer people nowadays, but the prejudice against them still exists. Heck, he hasn't talked about it to anyone, but he's already dealt with prejudice when it comes to his ethnicity. His very Japanese name has lost him a few opportunities, he knows.

The world is a scary place to navigate, and frankly, Kenji is a coward who'd like to take the easiest path possible.

Being out- and having a boyfriend- would be painting a target on himself.

He finds Ben's eyes again, and once again, he finds fear behind them. Taking a few steps forward, he hopes he doesn't regret what he's about to do. Though, he knows he definitely will.

"Ben, we…" Kenji sighs, finding the words hard to say. He rubs at his eyes, feeling them start to tear up a little, then presses on.

I'm so sorry, Seanny.

“We should stop dating.”

He averts his eyes as he says it, not even giving Ben the courtesy of looking at him as he does. He can’t- he might backtrack and come clean about everything if he looks at him for even a second more.

“We have to hide all the time, and I know how much it’s been affecting you.” Kenji continues, shaking his head. Honestly, he hates how he’s shifting the blame a little. “It’s been affecting me too. And like I said, I don’t think it’s going to get better any time soon.”

Ben is a pretty pale guy to begin with- something Kenji has teased him for before. After they started dating, he found the way the pale skin contrasted against his own so mesmerizing- like they were complimentary to one another. Like with their height, and demeanors, and their ability to talk to strangers. But it is in Ben’s porcelain skin that he found their differences the most beautiful.

In front of him, as he’s breaking the poor guy’s heart, does Ben’s skin go paler than he’s ever seen. He looks almost dead- and it’s *Kenji* that’s killed him.

“But- But you also said we should try? Remember?” The other’s voice is small and broken, and it takes every ounce of Kenji’s resolve to not cave.

“Let’s face facts, Ben. This would never have worked.” Kenji clenches

his teeth before continuing. “And, honestly…”

Should he even finish his thought? What he wants to say is the truth, but in the context of this conversation, it will sound horrible.

“Honestly?” Ben fishes.

You can’t quit now, Kon.

“I… I don’t know how I *feel* anymore.”

Ben looks at him like he slapped him.

“What- But, what changed? Is it because of your dad-”

He keeps trying to bring him up, and it’s starting to put Kenji even more on edge than he already is. Yes, he’s doing this because of his dad, but he can’t tell Ben that- not if he wants to avoid a confrontation between them.

That specific scenario would not end well for Ben.

“Don’t bring him into this.” He snaps, trying to deter the other.

“-because if it is, we can just be more careful.” Ben continues despite Kenji’s objection. He knew the shorter teen would be like this.

“That’s not-”

“Or" Ben cuts him off, "is it because of someone else?”

The sudden turn in the conversation nearly gives Kenji whiplash. He looks Ben dead on, and the fear he saw in the other has turned into anger, rumbling beneath the surface and ready to bubble over. He knows what he’s talking about- *who* he’s talking about. He figured she would come up at some point, but now that she has, Kenji isn’t sure he can handle it.

“That’s what it is, isn’t it?” Ben accuses. “You’ve been talking to Brooklynn a lot-”

“Again with this.” He rolls his eyes in dismissal, but inside, he’s panicking.

“Don’t act like I’m crazy.” Ben pushes on. He even gets up in Kenji’s space, and his voice is rising louder and louder. “You were so vague when I asked about the two of you. And you and her always-”

This is too much for Kenji. He didn’t know he was doing it until he feels Ben trying to break free, but he grabs the front of the shorter teen’s shirt and holds him angrily. Right now, he’s running purely on adrenaline and every one of his senses is dialed to 11.

Just as suddenly as he grabbed Ben, he’s being flipped onto the floor, the other putting all his weight into keeping him there. He even has Kenji’s hands held above his head. He’d be impressed if he wasn’t pissed about how easily he's been subdued.

“Get off of me!” He screams. Ben doesn’t budge.

“Not until you tell me about why you’re doing this. If it’s because of Brooklynn-”

“Don’t talk about her.” Kenji warns. This is starting to frustrate him. Ben is *so* convinced that he’s cheating on him with her. No matter what Kenji says, Ben won’t care and assume what he wants to. Did he *ever* trust him? Maybe not, from the sounds of it.

“You like her, don’t you? You tell me you care about me then you sneak around with her.” Ben insists, proving Kenji’s point.

“Shut. Up.” Kenji tries to break free, to no avail. Darn Ben and his insanely strong grip. Regardless, being sat on and accused of things that aren’t *really* true is getting Kenji even more worked up, so he keeps trying.

Then Ben starts to speak in a voice so soft and broken, Kenji almost doesn’t hear him.

“Was being with me just for fun? Or was it experimenting?” He sniffles. “Was *any* of it real?”

What? How can he think that…? Kenji may be trying to break up with him right now, but how can he think he never cared about him? How can, after all they’ve been through together, think it was just a phase for Kenji- like an itch that needed scratching?

No matter how this ends, he *can’t* have Ben thinking that.

“I never said th-”

“Because it was real to me.” Ben chokes out. “It was to me.”

Tears form in the corners of Ben’s beautiful blue eyes, threatening to fall. He’s seen Ben cry before, but that was during a scene they were filming, and not like this- not this heavily or this unhappy. Even back then, he found the sight hard to watch, proving what a great actor the other is.

What he’s seeing right now is heartbreaking. *And it’s all his fault.*

But he’s come too far to go back on everything. And if he did, and defied his father who might catch them, it would only end badly for both of them.

So with all his strength, he gets Ben off of him, and makes his exit quickly.

Though, not before sealing the deal, parroting some words his father said that scorned him. Now, he uses them against Ben.

“It wasn’t anything to me. I’m not a *disgusting freak* like you.”

The moment the door closes behind him, Kenji slinks to the ground

and weeps.

You have no right to cry. You're a coward who's doing what's best for himself, not for Ben. You just wanted an excuse to break up so you didn't have to deal with daddy and the potential *backlash. You took the first out that came along. At least he fought to keep you with him. You gave up. Pathetic.*

As much as those thoughts hurt him, Kenji can't argue with that assessment. After all, he's incredibly self-aware.

After a moment, he gets up, finds Hawkes and goes home. There, he lies in his bed, trying to figure out how he's going to live with his decisions.

Ben never did promotional work after that. Not for season three or the last two seasons either. Where the promotional work was concerned, the rest of them were told that he'd be busy filming for something else, but the timing seemed a little too coincidental, at least to Kenji.

Kenji ignored it, lest he be reminded how it's all his fault.

The others kept trying to organize hangouts with everyone, Darius and Sammy being the chief instigators, but in the end, it was only ever the five of them. Ben simply was never around anymore. All of them

noticed something was up, but Darius, clever as he is, put some of the pieces together.

“Did something happen at that press junket?” He asks him, point blank, during one of Sammy’s backyard barbeques.

“What do you mean?” Kenji replies, playing dumb.

“I mean, that was the last time any of us hung out with him alone. Mae only informed us he was busy *after* that.”

“You’re reading too much into nothing, D.”

“Did you two have a falling out or something?”

Nail on head.

“Well, it wasn’t bad. But, yeah. For now we're just keeping our distance from each other. Don’t worry about it.” Kenji isn’t sure he’s convincing, but Darius doesn’t pursue it further.

But the others do.

Over the next few weeks, as season four’s preparation and eventual filming got underway, the girls started to voice their concern over the palpable tension between the previously inseparable boys.

‘Hey, Kenj. I haven’t seen you and Ben hang out in a long while.

Everything alright between you two?' Sammy asked after rehearsals one day.

'Doofus, did you make fun of him or something? Every time he glances your way, he frowns. Like, even more than normal." Yaz questions him after sharing a scene with Ben.

'You know, if something is wrong, I'm a great mediator. I once helped the prime minister of Canada reconnect with a childhood friend.' Brooklynn informs him, as she also casually reminds him of how extensive her connections run.

Darius also asks, trying to follow up on that nugget of information Kenji let slip about the season three interview, but to his credit, he never pushes him too far- not that Kenji gives him much of anything.

As of late, it's his pink-haired costar that he's been relying on the most. Playing an onscreen couple means you're going to be spending a lot of time together, so she's slowly become one of Kenji's closest friends. He hasn't explicitly stated what was wrong, but like with Darius, he's at least let her know he and Ben aren't really speaking. She's definitely curious and he knows she'd love to get to the bottom of the issue, but so far, she's been respectful of his boundaries.

And… Kenji isn't sure, but he thinks he's starting to feel something for her.

He's definitely physically attraction to her- thinking she was cute from day one. He always considered her a friend, someone he could hang out with. But now that he's spending more of his free time with her, along with sharing more screentime with her, he's starting to figure her out as a person. He's starting to feel something beyond friendship. He thinks.

Thing is, he's pretty sure she feels something for him as well. Since they spend so much time together, Kenji has noticed how she slowly started treating him differently. Like, she'd buy him coffee and never expect repayment, she'd stand close to him for no reason, and most convincingly, she started opening up to him on an emotional level.

All can be excused as them getting along better as friends, but call him hopeful.

It's just… the reason he isn't sure how he feels is because *nothing* about this is like how it was with Ben.

With Brooklynn, he likes hanging out with her and hearing her stories and relying on her to take the lead when things are difficult. With Ben, they joked and played around and they shared each other's burdens. With Brooklynn, he feels like he's in the presence of someone great and feels honored to be her friend. With Ben, he can just exist, no judgment and no expectations.

And with Ben, they kissed a lot- something Kenji enjoyed immensely.

Maybe he needs to kiss Brooklynn to get a better idea of how he's actually feeling.

Fortunately for him, they share a kiss during the final episode of season four. Well, Ryan and Jenna do, but they as their actors, they will be kissing as well.

They didn't rehearse it. They just threw themselves into the scene, and did what felt right. The director only needed one take- telling them the shot was perfect. They guy casually mentioned that was one of the

better kisses he's seen, but Kenji couldn't find it in him to be flattered.

To him, that kiss was nothing special. It was nice, but… it did not provide any clarity.

Kenji figured that it might have been nerves. He was focused on giving a performance. They were being filmed, after all. The rest of the cast were there. A couple dozen crew were there.

Ben was there.

He figures he really won't know unless he does it in private. The problem is, of course, would Brooklynn even *want* to? After all, he's only guessing that the pink haired girl reciprocates his feelings.

No way to know unless he asks, right?

"Hey, uh… great job back there." He says awkwardly as she's getting her makeup removed for the day.

"Thanks. You, too." She replies, a smile and not-so-subtle blush on her cheeks. Maybe this will be easier than he thought?

"Say, uh, when you're done in here, I was wondering if I could ask you something?"

"Sure. But, uh, you can't do it now?"

“No, it’s kind of… *private.”* He squeaks out. A look of realization passes on her face, and she just nods at him through the vanity mirror. “Great! Uh, I’ll wait outside.”

Before long, Brooklynn is done and wonders what it is he wants to ask. The crew are still around, since a few more scenes need to be filmed involving the others, and Kenji doesn’t like the idea of someone catching them. Shocker.

Anyway, he leads her to somewhere on set, not really thinking about it, until he’s sure they’re far enough away from everyone. She follows along, but as soon as he stops, she questions him.

“Uh, you’re not gonna like, murder me or something, right?” She asks, both amusement and a vague hint of concern laced in her voice.

“What? Oh! Uh, sorry, I just didn’t want anyone to interrupt.” She quirks a brow at this.

“Okay. Well, it’s only us now. What’d you wanna ask?”

Oh, boy. Now that he’s actually here, free to test the waters, he’s extremely anxious- more so than when they filmed their earlier kiss. That kiss was at least part of the script, whereas this is something he’s asking his friend Brooklynn to indulge him in.

“Kenji? You okay?” She asks.

“I think I like you.” He blurts out, not planning beforehand how he was going to phrase this.

“What, really??- wait, you *think???”* She asks, flustered. Her cheeks light up like they did earlier, so Kenji takes that as a good sign.

“I think you’re really cool and pretty and awesome and talented and are a good friend and I kind of think you like me too?” He says, all in one breath, again, unsure of how to go about all this. His words seem to take her by surprise, as her eyebrows shoot way up.

“Well, thank you, first of all. But uh, what gave you the idea I *like* you?” She asks, her voice genuinely curious.

“Oh. Uh, just a hunch? I guess?”

“Again with the guessing.” She laughs. “Let’s say you’re right and I do. Why do you only *‘think’* you like me?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really had a crush before,” *crush on a girl,* he corrects mentally. “And I’m not sure how this is supposed to feel. I thought I’d know after we kissed earlier, but it-”

“-was a stage kiss, so you’re still not sure?” She finishes for him. He’s a little surprised how easily she guessed his thought process. She takes his silence as confirmation. “Okay, so, what is it you want to ask me? You know, the reason you dragged me to this dark corner?”

“I didn’t *drag* you here.” He huffs defiantly.

“Still waiting.” She answers smartly.

Well, here we go…

"Can I kiss you again?"

Brooklynn, for all her earlier confidence, smiles shyly at the question. It's cute, but for some reason, it just makes him even more nervous. Though he can't be sure, he swears he hears her mumble something along the lines of 'guess Yaz was wrong.' Whatever *that's* about.

All of a sudden, she's standing right in front of him, looking up at him expectantly.

"Okay."

Oh. Sweet.

He bends his knees slightly and cranes his neck to reach her. Earlier, the set was staged so she stood on some rocks and was much easier to reach. Like this, it's kind of an effort to even make contact.

It is like this that he realizes how close in height Brooklynn and Ben are.

Ignoring that thought for now, he focuses on the way her lips feel against his own. They're plush and soft and pleasant. Without the added audience and pressure of looking good for the camera, he allows himself to just *feel.*

It… doesn't feel any different than their first one. *He* doesn't feel any different either.

Brooklynn, apparently not sharing the sentiment, wraps her arms around his neck and deepens the kiss.

Letting her do what she wants, he keeps it up- going through the motions he thinks he should. It's definitely nice, and he's enjoying himself, but he thought there were going to be fireworks. He thought he was going to have this grand revelation that yes- he did have feelings for her and that the kiss would cement it.

He's just left with *more* confusing feelings.

Not liking how jumbled his mind is, he finally lets up and pulls away. He looks down at her and sees how brightly she smiles at him. He feels like he should smile back, but something catches his attention behind her.

Ben is standing there, looking like someone punched him in the gut.

It's then he realizes he unconsciously led Brooklynn to the place he and Ben would chill between takes- and, after getting together, do what he and Brooklynn just did.

Ben turns tail and runs.

He almost chases after Ben- ready to explain away what he just saw and to comfort the other. But he can't, since there is no way to explain this without making himself sound worse and worse.

You have no right to chase him anyway, idiot. You're the one who broke his heart in the first place, and now you've done it all over again.

No matter how much his heart was begging him to follow Ben, his feet wouldn't move an inch.

"K-kenji? What's wrong?" Brooklynn asks, concerned by his reaction, no doubt. Either she didn't see Ben or she doesn't think anything of him catching them kissing. To his shame, Kenji is grateful in either case.

"I, uh… I think one of the crew saw us. Someone ran when I looked up."

"Oh. Well, hopefully they're discreet." The girl laughs. "Though, it might help ratings if word got out we're dating."

He snaps his head to her, the use of the word 'dating' catching his attention.

"We're dating?"

"I mean… yeah? I like you, you 'think' you like me, we kissed. I'd

think we were dating." she answers simply.

The way Brooklynn just described what happened sounds a lot like how he and Ben started out. They haphazardly confessed to one another, shared a kiss, then made it 'official' in the span of three minutes. It was right here too, in fact- right in this very spot almost two years ago.

That little factoid makes him want to chase after Ben even more now.

But he's gotten this far with Brooklynn. He dragged her into this and learned of her feelings towards him. He's responsible for what happens now.

It doesn't help that he *still* doesn't know what he feels for her.

"Do you… *not* want to date?"

At the very least, he owes her an answer.

"Um. Can… Can I have some time to think about it?"

"Oh. Uh, okay…?" She replies, disappointment and confusion clear in her voice. Looking at her smile downturn makes his chest ache.

Though, it cannot compare to seeing Ben look even more devastated than when he broke up with him, he notes.

The pair of them awkwardly walk back to set, and Kenji's eyes instinctively search for Ben. He doesn't see the shorter teen anywhere.

What he *does* find is Darius, pouting as he eats a sandwich from crafty. His immediate reaction is to laugh- why is the dude so upset with his food? Before he can go over and see what's up- and ask if he saw where Ben went- a familiar crew member stops him.

Kenji isn't sure what her real name is, but everyone calls her Bumpy.

"Hey guys, sorry about the short notice, but the Director wants to reshoot the villain reveal scene."

"Oh. Okay, thanks." Darn. Always busy.

"And, hate to bother, but I can't seem to find Ben. Have you seen him?"

"Uh, not since we finished earlier," he lies, "but maybe he went outside for some fresh air?"

He's not too sure if she'll find Ben there, but she thanks him for the suggestion. Kenji has seen her and Ben hanging out before, and he got the impression they were friends. If he's right and Ben is outside, and not feeling great about what he saw, he hopes she finds him.

If it weren't for you, he wouldn't have run off.

Before he can spiral any further, he heads to makeup and hopes he can ignore the intrusive thoughts in time.

Since the day they've kissed, Brooklynn has made it a priority to talk to Kenji as much as she can. They text, they talk on the phone, and almost every spare moment on set is spent together. Kenji really enjoys her company and likes hearing what she has to say, so it's not a problem or anything.

No, the problem is he isn't sure he *wants to date her.*

He asked for time to think about it, and over a week has passed since then. Considering almost every moment of his free time is spent with her in some shape or form, he hasn't actually given it a proper assessment.

Today is an exception- Brooklynn is busy at a premier for another show she's been filming, so he finally has a night of respite from interacting with her. Not that it has helped him any, mind you. Sure, kissing her is great and they get along famously, but dating doesn't exactly sound like a step he'd want for them.

Maybe he'll know if it's the right move if he says yes and figure it out as they go. If he says no, he might lose the chance forever.

So, the day after they wrapped season four, he took her out to that cafe they talked at all those months ago, and asked her out properly.

She said yes, smiled at him sweetly and leaned in for a kiss, right there at the table. He obliged.

The next day, he saw that kiss plastered on so many media outlets he lowkey wished it never happened. He had figured someone would recognize them and take photos when they did it, and he hasn't been looking forward to the attention. Still, from the way everyone (his father included) acted from the 'news', it's a positive thing. Kenji was aware of the part of the show's fandom that wanted their character's together, and to an extent, he was also aware of the sub-fandom that wanted him and Brooklynn to get together. They celebrated like a war ended or something.

Some time after, he and Brooklynn became official and announced it to the world. They started doing interviews, magazine covers- you name it. Heck, at one point, Prada wanted them both as ambassadors.

The most incredible thing that happened though was how many role offers he started getting. Kenji was by no means *lacking* in terms of offers, but the sheer amount that started to come in from all the attention he and Brooklynn were receiving was staggering.

A part of him feels like he's a fraud- he's only getting so much attention because of his more famous girlfriend. A part of him feels shame- of what he'd done in the lead up to him *getting* said girlfriend.

His feelings don't get clearer since his dad has been treating him like a golden goose. He of course doesn't think making his dad happy is a bad thing, but is he happy that Kenji is doing well? Or, is he happy that Kenji can rake in the bucks easier now and he still has control over his money for the time being?

Which, if it's the latter, begs the question: is he *really* taking care of his money?

One day, he tries to ask him about it.

“What are you talking about? Of course I’m happy for you, son.” He assured him, but with that shifty smile of his, Kenji can’t be sure of his sincerity.

“And I’m glad to hear that, but…”

“What is it? Are you not happy or something? Is it the filming schedule? I’m sure it’s rough right now, but when you turn 18, filming is only going to get longer and longer.”

“Yeah, don’t remind me.” His dad would bring up the one thing he isn’t looking forward to about being an adult. “But it’s not that. I was just-”

“Oh, please don’t tell me you and Brooklynn have hit the rocks already.” His dad says with exasperation. “I get that you’re both busy people, but the best relationships take time and effort.”

Sure, that’s why you and I have such a great relationship, right?

Since Kenji has been friends with Yaz, Brooklynn, and Ben, he’s developed a kind of sarcastic streak. The three of them are easily the shadiest people he knows and he loves them for it, but their tendency to snap back or make offhanded quips has started to rub off on him.

Kenji didn't say that aloud by the way.

Instead, he chooses to try and placate the man.

"No no, things are... fine."

"Good! See, isn't being with her much better? The media can't get enough of you two."

"Sure. But, what I wanted to ask is-"

"Look, I'm sure it's very important, but there's something I need to take care of. Can it wait?" His dad cuts him off, pulling out his phone and already dialing a number.

"Oh. Sure."

"Thanks, son. You're doing great!" He says over his shoulder as he's already walking off.

Now, this is a sight Kenji is used to- his father walking away.

If he had any kind of spine, he'd have actually confronted him, but now, he's convinced the man everything is well- that he has everything he wants.

How Kenji wishes that were the case.

Season five has started and instead of it feeling like one last hurrah for the cast and crew, all of them seem to be more on edge than ever before.

It may have something to do with Kenji's dad showing up on set near daily. There hasn't been a day where Kenji gets a break from the man.

The worst part is he's getting more and more vocal and demanding. He's using what little pull he has with the studio to order people around and (not so subtly) convince the writers to give Ryan more screentime. The sad part is, he's already basically the main character because of how last season went- and pushing Paul and the others away from the spotlight.

To his credit, Kenji tries to rein him in, but every time he tries, his words go unheeded. Sometimes he thinks he's actually having the opposite effect, the man convinced that Kenji is just afraid to step into the spotlight or something. He's even been bringing his personal bodyguards with him- maybe to dissuade the other guardians from protesting to his demands.

There is only so much Kenji can do. He fears that if he pushes too far, his dad will make good on his word when it comes to Ben.

Kenji's 18th birthday finally comes, and as happy as he should be that he's legally an adult and now has full autonomous control of himself,

the fact is, his dad is still a factor in his life. He lives with him, uses his bodyguards, and recently, he's been using his car after getting his license.

To say he's keyed up would be an understatement. Brooklynn tries to comfort and distract him, and sometimes it works- though, most times, he can't get over how stressed everything is making him.

Unfortunately, all this stress bleeds over to Kenji's conversations with the others. He's been a little less than friendly, and at times, he's downright mean. The others seem to understand how stressed he is and give him some leeway.

But not Ben.

The other, probably jaded by how he's been treated for a while, snaps back and matches Kenji's passive aggressive attitude. It helps sell the idea of them being less than amicable to his dad, which Kenji can't complain about.

Part of him is happy they're talking again, even if it's in this capacity. Any conversation is better than none at all.

Part of him is annoyed at the other, since it's Ben's career that he's trying to save by putting up with his dad's behavior. He knows it's childish to shift the blame like this, but he's so stressed he doesn't care.

But an ever present part of him mourns their relationship, in whatever capacity, has now been reduced to petty arguing and snide comments.

He could try and repair their relationship, or at least try to be less of an ass, but he figures it's too late for even that. And, even if he did try, would Ben even want to give him the time of day? If Kenji were in his shoes, he certainly wouldn't.

Brooklynn has been there for him through this- the only part of his life he finds joy in now. They share so much with each other and have been each other's rock through many difficult times. But even then, he can't shake the feeling that he's deceiving her.

Why? Because he *loves* her… just not *romantically*.

One night when he was unable to sleep, he sat on his balcony and stared at the stars to pass the time. The quiet early morning air gave him some semblance of peace, and he used it to really think about the kind of life he's living right now.

Where his acting career is concerned- he's golden. He's set for the next four years, and something tells him this momentum will continue. As much as he'd like to take the credit, he knows a part of the reason stems from the pink-haired girl. But, as time has gone on, he finds he cares about that less and less.

Where his family is concerned, he's coming to his breaking point. His dad keeps procrastinating on turning complete control of his money over to Kenji. Things aren't helped that his dad is his agent, his financial advisor, and the one with a lawyer. Without his money, he can't hire a new manager, advisor, or lawyer. He doesn't know what to do.

And, where his relationship is concerned, he thinks he may want to end things between him and Brooklynn. Because of their packed schedules, they haven't been able to have any alone time- even on set, the story has progressed in a way they don't share many scenes

anymore. This was one of the excuses he used to justify breaking up with Ben, so why shouldn't it apply to Brooklynn?

But breaking up with her, and the fallout that will surely follow, will affect the other aspects of his life.

And, Kenji is still a coward, so he doesn't want to risk it.

Stringing the girl along is not something he can do anymore, though. She's been such a good friend, and he can't keep pretending to have feelings for her.

So one day, after a short day on set and both of them with free time, he decides to talk to her about all this.

"Well, we're here again." The pink haired girl points out. He led the two of them to the same dark corner of the set he did where they shared their second kiss. If you're wondering, they have only shared a couple more since.

"Yup." he replies awkwardly.

"You know, if you want to make out, we don't have to hide away in a dark corner to do that." She jokes.

She'll never know how much that *shames* him.

"That's not why I asked you to join me here." He admits.

“Ah, now you’ve finally decided to kill me. I expected this.” Her mood is still jovial. “Just so you know, I’ve got a few horror roles lined up. Maybe I should practice my scream.”

“B, there’s something I gotta tell you.” He pleads. Her smile drops, as does his heart at the sight.

“Oh. Okay. Is it- Is it your dad again?”

He hasn’t given her the whole picture about how things are with his dad- not the way he did with Ben. She’s smart though, and she’s come close to sniffing out the truth. That said, all she knows for sure is they don’t exactly get along but Kenji tries to placate him since he’s all he has.

“Not really. I mean, he’s kind of part of it, but- I just…” He trails off, not sure where he wants to start. He really should have thought about how he was going to go about this.

“It… kind of sounds like you’re breaking up with me.” She laughs. When he doesn’t correct her or join in, she immediately stops and steps closer to him. “Wait- are you? Is that what’s happening?”

“Brooklynn…”

“Oh. Uh, wow. I’ve… never been broken up with before. Huh.” She says, her voice surprisingly even.

“It’s not that I *don’t* like you-”

“Gee, thanks.” She interrupts. “Well, I know it isn’t because your dad doesn’t approve. And, I definitely know it isn’t negative press.”

The girl muses to herself, not at all sounding like someone who’s currently going through a breakup. At first, the nonreaction is upsetting- how can she not be sad? Frankly, she just sounds more interested in figuring out *why* rather than the fact it’s happening. Was she also not feeling it?

But as he thinks about it, this might be a blessing in disguise. If she’s not upset, then this doesn’t have to devolve into something messy.

“I- I kind of jumped into it thinking I’d know how I’d feel if we kept at it a while. And, while I do care about you and think you’re amazing-”

“You don’t like me, at least in a romantic sense.” She finishes for him, like the day he confessed.

“I’m so sorry, B.”

“That’s what a girl wants to hear when her boyfriend is breaking up with her: ‘sorry.’” She chides. He attempts to apologize more, but she holds up her hand and stops him. “Kidding, Kenj. You don’t have to be sorry. I uh, I kind of knew that’s how it was.”

“What?”

“Well, we only kissed like three more times after getting together. We haven’t gone on any dates, and frankly, we haven’t seen each other on

set all that often anymore." She explains. "I could live with that- we're busy professionals, after all. But I knew your heart wasn't in it after I saw you and a *certain someone* verbally sparring for half an hour."

Oh.

There's no way-

"I don't know what you're talking about." He tries to deny it.

"Please. I used to run an internet blog where I'd make things like this my business. And let me just say- you and Ben? Not hard to figure out something is going on there."

"There's nothing going on between us." He insists. Not anymore.

"Hmm. If you say so." She shrugs. "Because, from what I saw, I'd say there was some kind of unresolved tension you two have yet to work out. You guys argue, but in a way, it's like you're playing around. If I remember correctly, you two were thick as thieves. Something definitely happened that-"

"Stop! Please." He begs, surprised at his own outburst. The girl shares the sentiment, clearly startled by his words.

He doesn't want to hear another word. Of course Brooklynn, the most inquisitive person he knows, was able to figure him and Ben out without any actual context or proof.

But how shitty does Kenji have to be that his now ex-girlfriend figured out he still has feelings for someone else and have to tell him she's okay with it?

And he does- Kenji still has feelings for Ben. He didn't break up with him because he fell out of love. He was just scared of his dad, of what the media would think, and what kind of career he'd have if any of them found out. But even though he was the one who ended it, he can't deny his lingering feelings for the shorter teen.

"Hey. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." A voice softly tells him.

Kenji glances up and sees that Brooklynn is now right in front of him. Suddenly she's putting her hands around the back of his head and lowering him. At first he panics, thinking she's going in for a kiss or something, but when she connects their foreheads and holds his gaze like this, a bunch of the weight he was feeling is suddenly lighter.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"B…"

"I still care about you. Maybe not in a romantic way either, if I'm being honest."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I think I got caught up in the idea of having one of those 'storied Hollywood romances' that I didn't think about if that's *really* what I wanted. Not gonna lie, I was also thinking about ending things."

Kenji wants to laugh. The irony of the situation is not lost on him- the relationship his father wanted him to pursue was the one that he ‘confused friendship for romance’ and the one he gave up was the genuine article.

“Guess we both jumped the gun, huh?”

“Maybe. I um, don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think we should… *tell* people we broke up.”

“W-what?” This is a surprise. If they don’t feel anything beyond friendship, then why-

“I think you and I both know how much ‘being together’ has benefitted us.”

“Both? You were a famous celebrity before the show. I don’t think I’ve contributed.” he tells her honestly.

“Think again. I used to get a lot of high school role offers, which are fine, but since we started dating, I guess people have started seeing me as someone ‘romanceable’. Just yesterday, I got offered a romcom role, and like I told you before, I have a few horror flicks lined up. Final girl, or at least that's what I'm hoping. Being in a 'relationship' has been good to me.”

Kenji won’t lie- hearing that being with him has been equally beneficial for Brooklynn makes him feel a lot less guilty. In fact, he thinks he knows where she’s going with this.

“So… we break up behind the scenes… but appear like we’re still a couple in public?”

“Yeah. What do you think?”

At first he thinks it’s dumb. They’re actors- why should they put on a show in their personal lives? That’s what they do for a living already. It sounds exhausting.

Though, the more he thinks about it, the more he can’t help but see the appeal. Being perceived as a power couple certainly has its perks, and losing them after breaking up would no doubt suck. If all they have to do is keep up appearances once in a while with no pressure behind closed doors, then that sounds like something he’s willing to do.

Of course, being in a ‘relationship’ with Brooklynn means dating someone for real would be off the table. Oh, they could be careful, but all it would take is one paparazzi photo and boom! Scandal.

Still, a certain brunette with stunning blue eyes pops into his mind at the thought of dating someone else.

Forget it. He won’t want you back.

Still, maybe he should give all this a proper think before committing to it.

“I hate to sound like a broken record, but can I have some time to think about it? Until then, we can still seem like a couple, but I really want to really consider all the options.”

“You make it sound like a business transaction.” She laughs.

“I mean, isn’t it?”

“Hey, even if you say no and we just break up, I want you to know- You’re still one of my best friends. Nothing's gonna change that. And I’ll be here for you, whatever you need.”

Oh.

He really picked the right girl, huh?

It’s almost a shame they really couldn’t have made this work for real.

“You too, Brooklynn. Always.”

A moment of silence passes between them, then suddenly, a mischievous look crosses Brooklynn’s expression.

“So, about you and Ben-”

“Hush.”

“Hey, I’m gonna get it out of you one day.”

Unlike last time, Kenji didn’t only take a few days to decide.

He and Brooklynn did as he suggested- keep up the act. As far as he knows, no one is none the wiser. And, despite his conflicting feelings and newfound desire to stop being so hostile towards him, he keeps up the back-and-forth he has with Ben as well. At the very least, neither of them are moping around the set any more.

Too bad his dad insists on sticking around. The man is no longer obligated to be there since Kenji is now 18, but he always finds some excuse to show up.

Kenji really is reaching his limit when it comes to that man and his antics. For a while, he'd been busy at work and wasn't around, but as of late, he’s there and as disruptive as ever. He’s even taken to making Bumpy, Ben’s assistant friend, run all kinds of errands for him. The woman is too nice to deny him, but his requests are borderline unreasonable. Any attempt by Kenji to get him to stop or ease up is usually met with derision and offhand comments.

But then, when isn’t he?

Then, one day, Ben snapped.

Kenji was on set, resting in his trailer after a long day of filming. He isn't sure if the writers know something is up between him and the shorter teen, but they seemed intent on giving them several moments in the show for the final season. Today was one of those days where only the two of them were needed on set. Normally, he'd love it. Being with Ben, even in the capacity they do now, is at least interesting. But Ben seemed distracted by something, which certainly didn't help either of their moods.

Maybe that's why he attacked his dad.

At least, that's what he *thought* had happened when he found his dad groaning on the ground, and Ben comforting Bumpy off to the side.

"Dad?!"

He immediately runs to his side and helps him up, though his hands are swatted away. His dad looks seconds away from snapping, and Kenji needs only one guess as to who pissed him off.

Kenji finally looks Ben's way and sees a mixture of indignance- probably aimed towards his dad- and apology- probably aimed towards himself- on the shorter teen's face. Either way, it does nothing to quell his own annoyance that's been bubbling since that morning.

"Why did you hurt him?! What's wrong with you?!"

"I didn't do anything! He fell when tried to hit me!"

What?? There's no way. His dad can be a bit much, but he'd never *assault* anyone.

Didn't you used to think that before he started hitting you?

Shut up.

"Yeah, right." Kenji insists. "You probably shoved him. He could have been seriously hurt!"

"He's been taking advantage of Bumpy!" Ben retorts. "And, I caught him *assaulting* her!"

He hurt Bumpy too? Kenji knows he's been riding her kind of hard, but that and assault are two different things. Ben must be exaggerating things to justify finally hurting his dad. Back when Kenji first told the other about what his dad was doing to him, he made his desire to fight the man plain. At the time, it seemed like a joke. Now, it seems, he actually followed through.

When has Ben ever lied to you?

"Lies!" His dad screams at Ben. "We were talking when this freak came out of nowhere and jumped me!" Ben rolls his eyes at that.

“You can’t be serious-”

All of a sudden, two security guards arrive and eventually, they all head to the office to get everything sorted. Funnily enough, both their names are Brad. The Brads. Kenji tends to notice mundane things like this when he’s stressed.

His dad keeps insisting they involve the police, which, even to Kenji, seems an overreaction. This is Hollywood- a criminal record won’t lose Ben any work. But regardless, if the other is telling the truth, then calling them would be a serious step in the wrong direction.

Ben’s mom shows up and she looks really upset. His dad switches to his smooth talking voice when speaking to her, but it’s strained more than usual. Probably because he’s pissed. But the more he talks, the more Kenji can’t believe his story- Ben is kind of on the wild side as of late, but Kenji knows he’d never jump someone unprovoked.

Ben’s case isn’t helped when he threatens his dad. Granted, his dad called him something nasty again, but it seems like the shorter teen won’t be satisfied until he actually gives his dad a shiner. One of the guards drag him away and lock him in the conference room.

Eventually, his mom turns her attention to Kenji.

“What happened, Kenji? Nobody is making any sense.” She seems so worried and Kenji’s heart breaks for her.

“It’s all just a big misunderstanding. Ben will be fine.”

"But they locked him in a room!"

"That's just a precaution. It doesn't mean they think he's guilty. It'll be fine, Mrs. P."

She doesn't seem assured by his words, but she smiles at him all the same.

"Alright. You're such a good friend to him, you know that?"

Oh.

He can't tell her otherwise, can he?

"Is.. is that what he says?"

"He used to talk about you all the time to me, how much fun he'd have with you. And the others of course, but he seemed to hang out with you more than anyone. I don't know if it's the stress or what, but he's been so… distant lately."

"Distant?"

"He never talks about working on the show anymore. I come to set and don't see him for hours and then we go home. Nothing anymore about how his day went or what kinds of scenes they had you guys do. I'm starting to get worried about him. And then this happens? I just-"

This is all your fault, Kenji. You took the joy out of working here from him because you were too scared to stand up to your dad. He said he could have him removed, but really, how would he? You know *he's lost all pull at his own job, why would he have any pull with the studio? You could have avoided this whole mess if you just stood up to him.*

"Don't worry, Mrs P. Ben's a tough cookie." He assures her. "I'm not sure why he's been off, but I know he's going to get better soon. I'm sure of it. Besides, we only have a few weeks of filming left anyway."

"Right." She sighs. "You're right."

"Maybe you should talk to Bumpy? Ask her what exactly happened. She was with my dad and Ben when whatever it is happened."

"Okay. Thank you, dear. I hope you can come around again sometime."

Kenji thinks of the few times he spent time at Ben's house. The two would play games or watch movies or talk for hours on end. He'd lie to his dad that the others were here too, and since he hadn't been caught, so he kept going over. Of course, this ended when their relationship did.

"I'll try, Mrs. P."

See how much your decision affected others? And not just Ben and his

mom. You've been ignoring your friends. Heck, you've even snapped at them a few times. They still treat you well, but inside, they see you differently now. And then there's poor Brooklynn, who got swept up in all your drama. She deserved better than you.

Maybe he just wanted to believe that he could have a carefree future with a partner society (and his father) would find unproblematic- someone both his dad and Ben were convinced he already had something with. He'd hate to think that's what compelled him to choose her, but when he thinks about his now failed relationship with her, they remind of what he gave away to achieve it in the first place.

His mind sure likes shaming him. It's only because he has a lot to be ashamed about, but still.

That said, Kenji decides right then and there- he's going to try and make things better. Maybe he can't have everything go back to where they were, but he needs to not leave things the way they are.

First things first- he needs to tell his dad off.

"Why do you need to look at the footage? I *told* you what happened." His dad is trying to convince security of his innocence.

"Hey, dad."

"I'm busy, Kenji." He doesn't even look at him as he dismisses him.

"Now." Kenji insists. The tone catches both his dad and the Brads off

guard. At first his dad sneers at him, but realizing he has an audience, he relaxes his face and does as Kenji asked.

He leads the man to a more secluded corner of the office, hopefully out of earshot of anyone. Before he can open his mouth, his dad starts laying into him.

“Why aren’t you helping me? Hmm? I heard what you said. Why’d you tell that freak’s mom it was a ‘misunderstanding?’”

“I have a better question. Why don’t you want them to see the security footage? If you’re telling the truth, then there shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“How dare you speak to me like this!” His voice raises. He seems to catch himself, clearing his throat before continuing. “If we were at home, I’d-”

“What? Hit me again?”

Kenji isn’t sure where this new attitude is coming from. Normally, he would never be like this. Maybe it’s all the stress. Maybe it’s too many incidents where his dad is the problem. Maybe it’s the fact that Ben’s mom is worried sick a few feet away, and poor Ben is sitting in a room all alone, angry about how he’s being treated.

Maybe it’s all of that, and this is the last straw.

“Keep your voice down.” His dad hushes him.

“Why? That’s what you meant. And, by the way, if you ever do that again, I’m calling the cops myself.”

“You wouldn’t dare. I’m your father. We’re all each other has.”

“No. I’m all *you* have. Mom is gone, you drove Candy away, and no one at work has your back anymore. I, however, have my friends. I used to have more, until you made me drive him away.”

“It was for your own good, you ungrateful child!” His dad yells, no longer caring about keeping his voice down. “I was not going to have my son be some freak like-”

“If you don’t want me calling the cops right now, you’re not going to finish that sentence.”

“I- You-” He sputters.

Kenji takes a step forward, and he swears his dad flinches. The last time they were having a confrontation, Kenji was about the man's height. Now, he stands a few inches taller. When he was younger, he used to see him as this massive figure who stood as tall as a lighthouse, whose light would always guide him. Now, he sees him for what he truly is: a sad and pathetic man who never really loved him.

He never told anyone but Ben about what his dad did to him, mostly out of fear of having no one around who cared. He couldn’t have been more wrong- his friends would have been there. Ben would have.

Maybe Kenji can still make things right between them.

But first, he needs to set his dad straight.

“Let me lay out how this is going to go." He says lowly. "You’re going to drop this. Then, you’re never coming back to set ever again. Oh, you can threaten Ben’s career all you like- the show’s almost over already. Besides, I don’t think you could have even if you wanted to.”

His dad glares at him defiantly, but his shoulders slump and he seems to shrink in on himself.

“And you know what? I can legally take control of my finances now. You’re fired from being my manager. You aren’t going to mooch off of me anymore. And if you want my money? You *ask.”* Kenji takes another step, and his dad flinches again.

“I’ll move all my stuff out of the condo by the end of the week, and then I don’t want to see you again unless I’m the one who reaches out. Is all this clear, Dad?” The tacked on ‘dad’ at the end, with a lilt in his voice, seems to incense the man, but he holds his tongue when one of the Brads approach.

“Uh, sorry to interrupt, but the footage is pretty clear. The young man was telling the truth.”

His dad’s eyes flit fearfully between Kenji and the guard.

“And, I’m no legal expert, but I think him and the young lady could press charges if she wants.” The guard continues.

His dad looks startled at this news. His eyes immediately search for Bumpy's, who seems to have heard what the guard said. She remains quiet for a second, with Ben's mom holding her hand comfortingly. Then, she stands.

"I'm not going to press charges. I just don't want to see you ever again."

Kenji swears he can see his dad physically relax at that. Again, his eyes find Kenji's. Once, he saw love behind them, though that was a long time ago. Now, all he sees is fear and anger and greed.

Without another word, his dad takes their bodyguards and leaves.

"Uh, you have his number? If the young man wants to press charges, we'll-"

"I have it. I want to talk to him first, though. May I?"

"Oh. Sure, kid." The guard gives him the key and Kenji walks down the hall to the room where Ben is held up in.

The second the lock turns and the door opens, Kenji is greeted with the adorable sight of Ben pouting on the ground, glaring at him.

"What do *you* want?"

Kenji would laugh. He probably should. After all, he's on a roll- he's already told off his dad, something he thought was impossible. Why

should reconciling with Ben be any harder?

But of course, after months of less than amiable words being exchanged between them, Kenji instinctively matches the other's energy.

"Hey, cut the snark." He shakes his head, chastising himself. "I convinced my Dad not to involve the cops."

Ben rolls his eyes.

"I'm the one who should be calling the cops." Ben tells him smartly.

"Maybe, but he's hurt, and that's the only reason the security guards are even listening to him." He's not sure why, but he doesn't inform Ben they've already proven his innocence. Maybe it's so he can talk to him more- not that he'd admit it of course. Instead of explaining that better, Kenji shifts topics. "Your mom-"

"Is she okay?" Ben's shift in demeanor is immediate, his voice concerned.

"Yeah, she was pretty upset when they put you in here, but she's just sitting with Bumpy now."

Ben sits there, considering his words.

"And… how is Bumpy?"

This touches Kenji's heart. Really, it does. But Ben seems more concerned about everyone else and not about himself. Kenji didn't tell him he's off the hook already, so why isn't he taking this seriously? Kenji gave up a lot to keep him on the show, and now he's fighting and yelling and not caring about his situation.

So he snaps.

"The one you should be worried about is *you,* Ben. Why are you so violent lately-"

"I told you, I didn't do anything to him!" Ben snaps back.

"So you didn't try to jump him twenty minutes ago? Back in the office?" Kenji reminds him, pointing out that the incident in the parking lot wasn't the only sign of Ben's wild behavior.

Ben is standing now, jumping to defend himself.

"That was only because he-"

"Ben!" Kenji interrupts. "Just- Stop!"

No matter how justified he was, no matter what intentions he had, Ben isn't thinking clearly. This kind of thing can blow up and become bigger than any of them want. Not only that, if what happened hadn't been captured on camera, Kenji isn't sure Ben would have been cleared so easily. This might have gone from bad to worse.

Of course, Ben's high on his emotions, so he can't see that. Instead of continuing, he crosses his arms and glares daggers at him. Kenji furrows his brows, feeling a little more than frustrated at how this is going so far.

Kenji already decided he wants to try and be friends again. This is *not* the best way to start that process.

So he tries to step closer so he can talk more civilly with the other, but of course, Ben backs away from him.

"How-" What should he say? How should he segue into a more normal conversation, after all that? "How have you been?"

Yeah, smooth.

Ben seems incensed at the question. At first he looks as if he's going to tear him a new one, but he stops himself. He averts his gaze and seems to think about what it is he wants to say.

"Fine." Is all that comes out.

"You sure? You haven't been-"

"I said I'm fine." He reiterates curtly.

Okay… baby steps. Kenji knew this wasn't going to be easy. This will

take time. He can't expect Ben to want to chat like they *haven't* been at each other's throats lately. Maybe he can at least offer him and the others a ride home? He used one of his dad's cars to get to the studio today, and unless the man instructed one of the guards to take it back, it should still be in the lot.

"Alright… Did you need me to-"

"Why are you talking to me like we're friends?" Ben cuts him off. "This is the nicest you've been to me in ages. Why?"

The outburst startles Kenji. It's a fair question- though, Kenji can't very well say, 'I realize how wrong I was, please forgive me.' Well, he *could,* but would Ben even believe him? And if he did, would that solve anything? Things have just gone so wrong between them.

But he should still try, right?

"I'm just asking if-"

"Because I don't like it."

Ugh. This is starting to get frustrating again.

"What? You-"

"I don't want to hear you talk to me like that ever again. We both know how you really feel. I don't need *false hope* again."

Ben's words couldn't have hurt more if he wrote them on a sword and stabbed him. In such few words, he summarizes the pain that Kenji caused him, what he's continuing to do just by being here with him. And the ache in his chest that he feels hearing them is something he's going to have to live with, because it's all his fault.

But that doesn't mean things can't improve. That doesn't mean you should give up on ever being friends again. No matter what happened between them, they have a deep bond- all of them do. They're going to be a part of each other's lives forever.

Except… what kind of life are you asking Ben to resign himself to? Maybe you two won't go back to being lovers, but he's going to think about your betrayals every time he sees you. You haven't even broken up with Brooklynn- and don't intend to anytime soon. You're using each other and Ben had to pay the price to make it happen. Even if you become friends again, it won't erase what happened. You're forever going to be the part of his life he wishes he could forget.

Maybe… maybe things should *stay* as they are.

At least for now.

"Don't worry. Once we finish CC, we don't ever have to talk to each other again."

He meant that to be mean, so Ben can have a clean break from him.

But Kenji knows- that from how he was trembling as he was contemplating what to do, that it may have come off as desperate.

Still, once again, Kenji leaves Ben behind.

He left the studio without saying goodbye to anyone. He walked all the way home, not bothering to check if the car was still at the studio. His dad didn't say a word when he arrived. That night, he packed as much as he could until he was so exhausted that he passed out.

And, though he will deny it, Kenji dreamt of how he wished he handled everything, and the kind of life he could have had. When he woke up, he nearly wept.

But he got up, went back to work, and carried on. Because, at the end of the day, he made his own bed, and now he has to lie in it.

Kenji moved out and took control of his money. There... wasn't as much as he was hoping, but it was about as much as he expected. Still, life immediately after was hard. With nowhere to go, he ultimately had to rely on Darius' family for a while. They were more than welcoming, and through this time, he and Darius have become like brothers. He can't imagine a life without the other in it in some way.

Season five ended well, and the cast and crew parted amicably. A lot of expected twists and turns, but the critics liked it well enough. Like the last season, Ben didn't participate in promotional work. In fact, the week after the shorter teens 18th birthday, he flew off to Brazil. He didn't want a party. Kenji was tempted to send a gift- something to

show the other he still knows him well, to show him he cares in some way, but of course, he chickened out.

Things soon took a turn for the worst for his dad. From what little news he got, the man got fired from Mantah Corp and was blacklisted in the industry. And, despite his 'relationship' to Brooklynn, he feared his connection with the man may just overshadow it. It was a blessing, then, that his godfather Simon Masrani, decided to back Kenji publicly, even promising him a starring role in a new series.

Said series- one where he'd play a shape shifting superhero- was another long term project, and he loved it. He's always loved action movies and things of that nature, so staring in something where he can learn martial arts and show off for the camera suits him just fine. Maybe one day he can star alongside Dante Matthews in something!

When he was finally more stable, he moved out of Darius' place. He still keeps in contact with Mrs. Bowman and Brand, grateful to them for being there at his time of need. He still comes over every Thanksgiving.

He and Brooklynn kept up the pretense. They show up to premiers together, but go home separately. They have 'dates' where really, they're just hanging out and Kenji will put an arm around her. They've even starred in a movie together. Eventually they moved in together. It was cheaper than living separately, and they found a really nice place. Their adoring public ate it up, of course. They'll never know they just chill in the living room and sleep in different rooms.

Kenji made sure to keep up with the others almost religiously. No really, he watches *everything* the others are in and collects them on DVD and BluRay if possible. Even for the most miniscule of appearances, Kenji will watch.

He owes them- the so-called ‘Camp Fam’- everything. They really are a family, and though they’ve all moved on to bigger and better things, they’re all pretty much the same- as is their friendship.

Of course, everyone but him keeps in contact with Ben.

If you’re wondering, Kenji keeps up with *his* works too. Of course he does. Though he's yet to extend an olive branch, he still cares about the other. He’s so proud of what he’s been accomplishing, and he never misses a single thing with him in it.

Yaz and Sammy didn’t look for stardom, but they’ve found their niches and they do well in their fields. Also, the two have this weird, ‘will they won’t they’ vibe to them, and every time he or Brooklynn asks, they deny anything is going on between them. Still, he and Brooklynn are their biggest shippers fans.

Darius continued to be his rock as the years passed. The two hangout often and have even taken a couple of vacations alone together. He’ll occasionally ask if Kenji is ready to explain what happened, but he never guilts him into sharing or making Kenji feel bad about it. One day, he mentally promised the other, but that day just never came.

Even with all these close friendships, he never once explained to any of them what happened between him and Ben.

The most he ever told Brooklynn was that she was right in assuming they were an item at one point, but no details beyond vague hints. She hasn’t said a thing to anyone, as far as he knows. What surprised him the most, however, was how easy it was to admit it. He’d like to think it’s because he’s matured, or at the very least, that he's found some courage- courage enough to admit he’s Bi.

Maybe he can finally be out publicly. Of course, doing that and ‘dating’ Brooklynn may prove problematic.

Maybe… he’ll have to finally end their neat little arrangement.

Not things he’s looking forward to, no matter how much he thinks it’s for the best.

Of course, the one thing at the top of his to-do list is finally reconcile with Ben. He’s not expecting anything. He wouldn’t dare. But, as we know, Kenji can be a bit selfish. Well, if it’s selfish of him to want the other in his life again, after years of being apart, he’ll take it. After all, life has been kind to both of them. Call it wishful thinking, but he hopes that what they’ve gone through since parting will make their eventual reunion less painful.

Now, if only Kenji had a *reason* to see the other again…

-present-

The sun is high in the sky by now. Forget breakfast- the pair are late for lunch. But, neither of them moved from Kenji’s couch as he regaled the other his side of this messed up tale. He didn’t embellish, nor did he leave anything out. He left everything on the table, so to speak. He isn’t sure if he should be concerned that Ben hasn’t said a word for the past half an hour- just listening intently to what Kenji had to say.

“So, yeah, I was told by Kelly that I had a role offer from Masrani studios, and… here we are.” Kenji finishes off lamely.

They sit in silence for a while, neither one of them making the first move or speaking first. Then all of a sudden, Ben gets up, and goes to the kitchen. At first, Kenji was concerned he was going to leave, but soon enough he’s back with a pair of bottled waters.

“Sorry. Thirsty.” Ben explains quickly as he downs the whole thing, sitting back down where he had for the last few hours. “God, I love this Parisian water you buy.”

Okay… he doesn’t *sound* off. He’s even making passing comments. This is… good?

“The only kind of water my dad kept in the house. I grew up on it.” Kenji informs him.

“Hmm, seems like your dad influenced you a lot.”

Oh. That was *not* the first comment he thought Ben would make about his story.

“Yeah, and not always for the better.” Kenji agrees.

“I’ll say. Sorry if this is rude, but I really hate that man.” Ben huffs, his eyes trained on his now empty bottle.

“Hey, you’ll get no arguments from me. I haven’t seen him in person for over a year.”

“You talk to him still?”

“Not by my choice. He always finds a way to contact me and of course, it’s to ask me for ‘a loan.’ Pshh. At this point he ‘owes’ me a hundred thousand.”

“Wow. I’m amazed you still give in and give him so much.”

“Eh. I know I told him I don’t want him in my life anymore, but if I don't give it to him, he’s just going to lie and scheme his way into getting what he needs. The lesser of two evils and all that.”

“Hmm.” Is all Ben says.

Another beat of silence passes.

Kenji admits- he’s starting to get nervous. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting should he tell Ben all of this, but this silence is deafening.

Then, maybe reading his thoughts in a way only Ben could, the other finally speaks.

“So, first of all, screw you for deciding what was best for both of us.” Ben says evenly. “I appreciate that you thought you were doing both of us a favor, but doing it the way you did sucked ass, Kenj.”

“I know. I know, I know. I can’t-”

“Not done.”

Kenji shuts up.

“But I want you to know… I get it. You were dealing with your own demons and dealt with them the best you knew how. No matter how much it hurt me at the time, I don’t think I can fault you for that.”

“Babe…”

“Shh.”

“Sorry.”

“And… I never knew that’s how it was between you and Brooklynn. I always just assumed you two had a fairytale life. You know, at my expense.” Ben laughs derisively. “But, it makes sense. Now that I think about it, I never saw another kiss photo all these years.”

Ben scoots himself closer, Kenji opening his legs so he can sit right in front of him.

“I didn’t know how your story was going to go, but hearing it, I realized how much you went through. I’ve… already forgiven you for everything that happened, but I need you to know how much it means

to me that you trust me enough to share all of this."

Kenji, risking another shushing, speaks up.

"I know. I wanted to come clean for a long time, but I never found the courage to do so. I was so happy when we started hanging out again. And, I couldn't be happier that we're together again."

"But now… I'm the one making us hide this time. I'm doing the same thing that I resented you for all that time ago." Ben laments.

"Hey, this and that are two different things. I don't care if you want to hide til we're old farts- I'll wait as long as you want, because you were willing to wait for me when I wanted to."

Ben looks at him, with his eyes big and blue and beautiful, and Kenji can't help himself anymore. He slowly closes the distance between them, and Ben meets him halfway. The kiss is short but it conveys so much.

When they finally pull apart, Ben frowns.

"What?? What's wrong?" Kenji asks.

"I know it's stupid, but… I can't help but think how different our lives could have been." Kenji sighs. He rubs small, soothing circles on Ben's shoulders.

"I get what you mean. I thought about that too. But you know what?

Don’t take this the wrong way, but I think maybe it was for the best.”

Ben raises a brow at him and Kenji puts his hands up defensively.

“I don’t mean what happened between us is a good thing or anything, but if things didn’t happen the way they did, we never would have experienced all the things we did in the years we were apart. Would you have gone to Brazil otherwise?”

“Maybe. Probably not.” Ben admits.

“But you loved it there, right?”

“For sure. I want to go back one day.”

“And I’d like to take you there. You can show me around.” Ben smiles.

“I’d like that.”

“My point is, it happened, and we’re still here, together. I don’t know about you, but I’d say it was meant to be, between us.” Ben rolls his eyes.

“You’re so corny.”

“And you love it.” Kenji kisses his cheeks, earning him a laugh.

Another moment of silence passes, but this one isn't strained like earlier. This one feels lighter, like the air was literally cleared between them.

"Hey." Ben starts again.

"Hmm?"

"If... if you ever get to the point again where you're so stressed you feel like you're spiraling, lean on me. Talk to me. I'm not sure what I can do, but I don't want you getting in your head and making insane decisions on your own."

Oh, Kenji really loves this guy.

He leans down and connects their lips again. When he pulls away, he smiles up at his lover.

"I promise, Seanny."

Part of Kenji suspects Ben has some lingering resentments. Part of him wonders if he's sparing Kenji's feelings and worries that Ben might spiral on his own.

But right now, things are okay between them. Right now is what matters. Not what happened before, not what might be. Now.

And right now, he's in Ben's lap, and all Kenji wants to do is kiss him more.

Before he can, both of their stomachs growl angrily. They share a look before laughing shyly at the awkward display.

“Lunch?” Ben suggests.

“At this point, we might as well have dinner.” Ben considers this, then smiles as he thinks of something.

“I know the perfect place.”

“Leave it to you to know an amazing Korean BBQ place I’ve never heard of.” Kenji says over the din, as he and Ben grill meat in a crowded restaurant.

“This is the only place I can get grubs!” Ben explains, just as he’s putting another juicy caterpillar sized grub on the grill. The other explained that he tried them while in the Amazon, and since, he's loved having them as a kind of 'treat.' Which is gross, but he enjoys them, so Kenji doesn't protest.

“Yeah, I’m not trying them, babe.”

“More for me.” Ben shrugs.

This is nice. At first, he was worried that going to a crowded place would be a bad idea, but since Ben is a regular, he guesses it's okay. No one has come up to them asking for an autograph or selfie, so they've been able to just enjoy themselves.

As they eat and chat, Kenji's mind lingers on earlier in the day.

Kenji really thought that after he spilled his guts, there'd be a dramatic fight or something- maybe some screaming and your standard drama affair. But, as it's turning out, coming clean was almost cathartic for them both. Now that there isn't that lingering guilt in his mind, Kenji really feels like he can enjoy his time with Ben unapologetically.

Halfway through their dinner, Ben looks over his shoulder, and his eyes go wide as saucers.

"Ben? What's up?"

"Don't look, but Brooklynn and Darius just walked in."

"What??"

"I don't think anyone is with them. I guess they came alone."

"Woah, isn't that kind of-"

"Like a date?"

“You said it, not me.”

“Well, going out to eat alone doesn’t *necessarily* means its a date.” Ben argues.

“We’re on a date.” Kenji points out.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean- oh, never mind.” Ben gasps.

“What??”

Instead of waiting for a reply, Kenji not so subtly turns around and looks for their friends. It’s hard to miss Brooklynn. Her hair may be hidden in a cap, so no pink hair to look for, but he always had a knack for finding her in a crowded room. Kenji has a limit to how much he can schmooze, so he developed a skill of finding her so they can leave parties or events.

When he zeroes in, he sees why Ben gasped.

The pair of them are tucked away at a far table in the corner, and are currently sharing a sweet and simple kiss.

"Definitely a date." He and Ben say nearly synchronized.

Well.

Filming in a few days is going to be… interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Lonely by Justin Bieber, Benny Blanco

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading!

I'm so sorry this took well over a month to finish, but as you can see, it's close to 17k words lol

I didn't even know this song existed until my nephew played it for me recently lol I was screaming cuz it was the PERFECT Kenji song for this AU (and in general, actually)

I really wanted Kenji's part of the story to be him thinking he's doing everyone a favor but actually hurting them in the process. I hope the canon parallels aren't overshadowed by my messy timeline handling lol

Again, I'm not entirely used to writing about child abuse, so apologies if anything seems not right/ is offensive. Lmk if that's the case

EDIT: Going to push for next chapter on Tuesday, 4/18! Sorry for the delay!
EDIT: I'm so sorry y'all. I've been swamped, so I haven't really had time to work on this too much. Full disclosure- I'm going to finish this story and all the art for it. Currently, chapter 11 is 1/2 done. But, over the next few weeks, I'm going to be MIA as I prep for my 2-3 month long relocation (I'm bringing my laptop and tablet with me, so I can work). Thank you for being patient with me over the constant chapter delays!

As an apology, here is the name of the next chapter and a basic summary

Chapter 11- **Baby I'm Yours** *(song by Arctic Monkeys)*

Ben and Kenji wrack their brains trying to figure out how to talk to Darius and Brooklynn about their secret(?) romance! However, Kenji seems a little too into it and Ben is concerned over why. In the meantime, the pair also try to find a way to get the other pair in their friendgroup, namely Yaz and Sammy, to come clean as well. Will the duo succeed? Or are they seeing signs that aren't there? And why is Kenji getting more and more irritable lately?

UPDATE: I'm settling in alright at my temp relocation, but I've been busy so I've hardly worked on ch 11. I am determined to publish the chapter by Friday, 5/12 though! Check back soon, I promise I haven't given up on this :))

UPDATE 2: I'm so sorry for the delay. Long story short, my dad had to be hospitalized and when he finally got well enough to be discharged, I had to be his caretaker. I worked slowly on the next chapter, but not enough got done to release when I hoped. He's doing better now, so I've found more time to work on it. I'm confident I can update by Friday, 6/23! Look forward to it!

UPDATE 2.5: I FINALLY CAME HOME! I was relocated for a couple of months, but me and my dad got the go ahead and we travelled back home on Friday and got home Saturday~! Sorry I didn't update :(BUT, I'm aiming for Wednesday, 6/28! It's like 80% done!

Teenage Blues

Chapter Summary

Ben and Kenji, despite their busy schedules, take time to figure out what's going on with their friends.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I'm so sorry this took three months to upload :(More on that in the ending notes! For now, I hope you enjoy!

Ben POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say today was a rollercoaster of emotions would be an understatement. Between the conversation he and Kenji had and who they saw at dinner afterwards, Ben feels he's experienced the entire human emotional spectrum in a matter of hours.

So… Darius and Brooklynn? Either kissing on the lips is something 'just friends' do nowadays and Ben is out of the loop, or those two have something more going on.

If Ben feels emotionally exhausted, he can't imagine how Kenji is doing, especially after seeing his ex and best friend in the restaurant.

The other seemed as surprised as he was that their castmates seemed to be romantically involved. As it is, the taller man has been pacing Ben's living room for half an hour, barely saying a word to him. After dinner, they decided to spend the night in Ben's house for a change (motivated mostly by the fact it's closer to the restaurant than Kenji's place). While this isn't the first time Kenji has visited, the pair haven't been here together since that photo scandal.

Honestly, that suggestion of Mae's on getting personal *everythings* is looking more and more desirable. If he at least had a bodyguard, he'd feel better about bringing Kenji around more often. A lawyer and personal assistant would be welcome as well, for obvious reasons.

Anyway, they're at his home, and Ben wishes his boyfriend would just relax already.

"Kenji, you're gonna wear down my floor."

"Hmm?" The other mutters softly as he continues his pacing.

"Look, sit down. Watching you is starting to make me motion sick."

Ben pats the empty space next to him on his sofa. It takes him a moment, but Kenji eventually joins him. At first, Ben is relieved he got him to stop, but soon enough, the other starts bouncing his leg up and down. With Kenji's massive frame, it's shaking the whole sofa. *Two steps forward…*

"Okay, what's up?"

"Hmm?" Kenji repeats.

"Why are you so distracted?"

"I'm not distracted. If anything, I'm super focused." The other replies simply.

“Uhhuh…” Ben quirks a brow. “And what is that you’re focusing on?”

He knows the answer, but this strange behavior doesn’t seem to be going away, and he’d rather help Kenji work through it than leave him to pace around and fidget. That, and, he's actually worried his boyfriend might break something if he keeps this up.

“Do you think maybe we saw wrong? Maybe it wasn’t even them?” Kenji asks directly.

“I mean... maybe? Her hair was well hidden, but I swear it was Brooklynn, and if that was her, the other had to be Darius.”

Kenji frowns a bit at the word ‘smooch’.

“I don't know.” The taller man sighs. “I can't imagine them two of them together, y'know? I just don’t get it.”

“Really? They were always close on the Camp Cretaceous set, and they’ve stayed in regular contact over the years. I think it'd be surprising, but definitely not impossible.” Ben offers.

Back in the day, he hadn't assumed those two had anything going on behind the scenes, but he was always a firm Jenna/Paul supporter, as was a significant portion of their fandom. Their natural chemistry was not limited to their shared screen time. Whether it was on set or during rehearsals, or even when they hung out during time off- the pair got along famously.

In retrospect, one could say this was a long time coming.

“Not impossible, huh?” Kenji pouts, and as adorable as the sight is, this behavior is starting to put Ben off. The other seems almost upset by just the *idea* that their friends could be dating.

A rational part of him is wondering if it's because they were keeping it a secret, keeping Kenji and the others out of the loop. The more insecure part of him wonders if it's because Brooklynn moved on.

No, that can’t be it. Kenji has also moved on- they're together now. Why would he feel any kind of jealousy? Although, even if they weren’t romantically involved, Brooklynn and him were ‘together’ for years. From what Ben can tell, they’re great friends. If anything, Kenji should be happy for her- for Darius as well.

An increasingly nagging part of Ben worries that, despite everything that’s happened between them since, Kenji still might have lingering feelings for her and doesn’t like her being with Darius.

Instead of continuing to speculate- and potentially spiral even further- he just straight up asks Kenji what his deal is.

“Okay, why are you pouting? What’s got you upset?”

“I’m not pouting,” He pouts harder. “And I’m not upset.”

“I'm glad, big guy. I mean, we’re happy for them, right?”

“Do you think she had feelings for him while she was with me?” Kenji asks suddenly, ignoring his question. Ben almost laughs.

“Who knows? Anyway, you two were only *together* for a month, so does it matter?”

“Well, that’s my point! It was *real* for only a month, but to the *public,* we were together since we were teenagers. Something tells me this whole thing between them isn’t recent.”

“So what if it isn’t? What, are you worried that people will think she was cheating on you with him or something?” Kenji looks forward and his eyes are distant as he says nothing to Ben’s comment. “Really? That’s what it is?”

“I mean, that’s *part* of it!” Kenji groans into his hands, slinking on the couch until he’s barely on it, his butt nearly sliding off. “I know it wouldn't be 'cheating' for real, but still. Wouldn’t you be concerned if people thought you weren’t good enough to keep someone? The idea that your lover would look at someone else while they’re with you?”

“I don’t have to *imagine* that.”

Oh. Crap, he said that out-loud, didn’t he?

He hesitantly glances at his boyfriend. For the first time since they got here, the taller man is focusing squarely on him, his expression unreadable. Though, from the way his brow is knit and how quiet he suddenly got, it isn’t hard to guess what he’s thinking.

Ben hasn't made a passive aggressive comment like that since they got together. Maybe it's the fact earlier today they had that chat and Kenji revealed what exactly went on with him and Brooklynn, maybe it's the fact Kenji's attitude right now was starting to annoy him. But whatever the case, he shouldn't have said that.

“Sorry, I didn’t-”

“You don’t *ever* have to apologize, babe. *I’m* sorry. I shouldn’t have phrased it like that.” Kenji interrupts, his voice soft and measured.

Kenji sits up and scooches himself closer, holding Ben’s gaze. The look in his eyes has shifted, and Ben knows he means what he said.

“Thanks. And I’ll work on not making offhanded comments like that.”

“Well, if you do, I deserve ‘em.” Kenji whispers. “But thanks, babe.”

The other leans in and Ben meets him halfway, the two sharing a sweet and chaste kiss. The second they pull apart, Ben’s eyes once again meet Kenji’s.

“So, feeling better?”

“Ehh, a little.”

Ben laughs and Kenji joins him. A comfortable silence passes between

them, but Ben finds himself curious about something Kenji mentioned earlier.

“Hey, Kenj?”

“Hmm?”

“You said it was only ‘part of it.’ What else is bothering you about Darius and Brooklynn?”

“Don’t worry, I was just kidding about not feeling better.” He pauses, then looks away. “More or less.”

Ben gives the other a look. Kenji turns to look at him, holds out for two seconds, before finally sighing and giving in.

“Okay… I guess- I mean, I consider the two of them my best friends. I love Sammy and Yaz, and I’m pretty close to some of my other former co-stars as well, but those two are basically my siblings.”

“I get that. I feel that way about Darius too.”

“Then maybe you’ll get where I’m coming from here.” Kenji replies vaguely. Instead of pressing him on that, he waits for the other to organize his thoughts. Soon enough, he continues. “I don’t know. I’m a little… upset that they didn’t tell me.”

Ah. That was Ben's first guess.

“Well, your ‘breakup’ was pretty recent.” Ben reminds him. “Maybe they share my fear of being at the center of a scandal. Especially since it would involve you too.”

“And I get that, I do. But, couldn’t they have told *me?* Privately? It’s not like I’d go blabbing or something. I would've been happy for them. I mean, I *am* happy for them.”

“Of course you are. But, it’s not like *we* told people about us back then, right?”

“No.”

“And it’s not like we didn’t love or trust them or anything. We were just afraid of *certain* people finding out, and we played everything by ear.”

“And look how *that* turned out.” Kenji chides himself.

“I won't lie and say it was easy. It definitely took some time, but we’re alright now.” Ben points out. “I don’t think you should be taking this personally. Maybe they’ll tell us all eventually. Hopefully, before some paps find out and blows everything out of proportion. Maybe, they won’t say anything at all. If that happens, it doesn’t mean they don’t trust us.”

“Doesn’t it?” Kenji says, a hint of sadness in his voice.

“I don’t think so. People have things they keep to themselves and

things they share. That's just all there is to it."

"Maybe we should ask them."

"What?"

"You know, in case we were wrong? I mean, don't you think that's better than guessing?"

Ugh, he really isn't going to let this go, huh? Okay, Ben can play along… a little.

"Well, maybe we shouldn't be so direct with it. Don't want to upset them, yeah?"

"Oh. Okay."

"Maybe… the next time we're on set, we can try and catch them then?"

"You think they'd do anything with anyone around?"

"We did. A lot." Ben laughs.

"True…"

Kenji sits there, a pout on his lips. At first Ben thinks his words fell on deaf ears and his boyfriend is going to stew on this for a while longer, but suddenly, Kenji slaps his own face. Hard. It startles Ben. Before he can ask what the heck that was about, the taller teen smiles brightly at him, once again catching him off guard.

“Sounds like a plan. Thanks, babe.”

“Uh, anytime.” Ben says hesitantly. He doesn’t remember Kenji ever doing that before, but if it helps him from spiraling, he won’t ask. Besides, he looks genuinely more relaxed than when they first arrived.

“Not to be nosy or anything,” Kenji starts, rising to his feet. “But the last time I was over, we only hung out in here.”

“We *made-out* in here, to be exact.” Ben says, also rising to his feet. “What are you getting at?”

Kenji smiles down at him, grabs Ben’s hand, and gestures to the door leading to the hallway.

“C’mon. Give me the tour.”

“Now? It’s almost midnight.” Ben half complains as he glances at his wall clock.

“So? Your house isn’t all that big.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“I’m just teasing babe. Besides, I was hoping we could have the *grand finale* in your… bedroom.” Kenji says in a soft voice.

Oh geez. Recently, he and Kenji have been more active when it comes to those kinds of activities. At this point, he should be used to that kind of talk from the other. Still, every time Kenji makes flirty or suggestive comments, Ben’s face heats up against his will, showing the other how much he affects him.

If he’s honest, Ben would like nothing more than to go to sleep already. The call of his bed is more than tempting, especially after today. It almost wins out. However, the alluring look in his boyfriend’s eyes motivates Ben to at least entertain his request.

So, he leads the taller man by the hand into the hallway as they start this ‘tour.’ He also makes a mental note to set an alarm to wake them before Carla gets in, or they might scare her half to death if Kenji were to wander in the kitchen half dressed.

A couple of days have passed and filming has resumed. Today, serendipitously, happens to be a day when everyone else is on set as well.

Meaning, Ben and Kenji can do some up close and personal snooping on Brooklynn and Darius.

The workload is light today- only two scenes for both of them.

Because they're the leads, their days are normally the longest, so this is a nice change of pace. Still, Ben is sure they'll find a way to hang around the set longer if they have to.

But of course, things have a way of going wrong for Ben.

"I was reviewing the footage from last week, and the editor and I believe a couple of reshoots are necessary." Director Wu tells him and Kenji in his office at the studio. The pair share a knowing and vaguely exasperated look.

"Uh, which scenes in particular?" Kenji asks.

"Fortunately for you two, it's for scenes on the lot. All the sets are dressed already, so it's not too much of a headache in that regard. Still, I'd really like to finish them today."

"In addition to what we're doing for dailies?" Ben asks, his voice steady despite dreading the answer.

"If all goes well, your day should end no later than 10pm. Please understand that filming is supposed to end in three weeks and the studio will not tolerate delays."

Oh. Right. Filming is gonna end.

On dramatic, nonaction films like these, filming rarely lasts longer than a month. However, because of their perfectionist director, enthusiastic writer, disproportionately large budget, and a Camp Cretaceous cast reunion draw, the studio allotted just about three months for filming and are giving them their complete support.

Ben has been on longer projects than this, but every day has been fun and memorable, in no small part because of his longtime co-stars being involved. Maybe he's getting sentimental as he gets older, but hearing that they're more than halfway done puts him in a mood.

A tiny but irritatingly loud part of him wonders what will become of him and Kenji after filming ends.

Shut up, he's not being paranoid.

Think about it- Would they have even reunited if not for this film? With the way he was actively avoiding Kenji, and the way Kenji never went out of his way to reconnect, there's a chance it would have been years before they met face to face again. And, if not for the film's subject matter, would either of them really have signed on in the first place?

And even though they're good *now,* who knows what's going to happen in the future? There are many examples of other actors' relationships continuing after filming, only for it to end when their next big project with another actor comes along. It's the age old story.

Ben doesn't want to say he doesn't have faith in what he and Kenji currently have, but it seems the odds aren't exactly stacked in their favor.

But just as pessimistic as he's being, Ben can't help but be *hopeful* as well.

Even if it most certainly wasn't the intention, this project was almost designed for him and Kenji to reunite. The pair of them, after

everything, out of all options, are handpicked to be the leads in a gay film? With a story almost too reminiscent of their own?

Call him sappy, but that almost sounds like fate. Like it's written 'in the stars' if you will.

Maybe he's been watching too many romance movies lately.

In any case, there are still a few weeks before filming officially ends, and for now, things are okay. Well, it would be, if only they could find time to spy on Brooklynn and Darius to satiate his boyfriend's curiosity. He can't exactly do that if he's busy filming scenes all day.

When he and Kenji exit Wu's office, the taller man nudges him to get his attention.

"Don't be too bummed. Since Wu knows what he wants, reshoots shouldn't be all that long."

"We'll see." Ben says tiredly. At this point, they're already two hours into their workday. Makeup and costuming took up all that time, which can be surprisingly tiring. If nothing else, hearing about their extended work day has Ben itching for another cup of coffee.

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Sucks that we can't play detective, though." Kenji sighs, a hint of disappointment clear in his own voice. "But, like Wu said, we still have a few weeks left. Plenty of time to catch them with their guard down."

"Yeah…" Ben says distractedly. "A few weeks…"

Kenji seems to notice the shift in Ben's behavior, because he immediately reaches for his hand, stopping him. Normally, Ben would pull away since they're on set, but his mind can't seem to quiet down.

“Babe?” Kenji says softly, so no one around can hear. “What’s-”

“There you two are!” A loud voice calls out to them. Claire approaches them, a retinue of toadies in tow. Kenji instinctively removes his hand from Ben's. “I have your new lines for the reshoots.”

“More rewrites?” Kenji guesses. He and Ben take their new sides, the papers covered in scribbles and highlighter.

“Nothing too major.” She assures them. “I figured since you're reshooting anyway, we can try some different dialogue. I saw the footage for scene 103 and it came off a bit… bland.”

“Oh.” Ben says.

“I’m not saying you boys weren’t anything but great!” she’s quick to assure. “But… yeah, some changes were needed.”

“Well, alright, we’ll go look these over and-”

“Has anyone seen Ben?” the AD calls, interrupting him.

“...deal with it later. Alright, gotta go.”

Claire is already on the move to deal with something else. As Ben turns to leave, he feels something pinch his butt. He lets out an undignified yelp, and looks around. He's greeted with the sight of Kenji stifling a laugh. Ben has enough presence of mind not to chew him out here, but he glares at him nonetheless. The stressed out AD calls for him again, and Ben gets a moveon.

The last thing he sees of Kenji is the taller man waving at him cheekily.

Today is definitely going to be a long day.

Six hours later and Ben has finally finished his dailies. Maybe it’s the added time crunch, but Wu seemed more than obsessed with getting even the simplest two-man dialogue scenes right. He lost count on how many takes it took for him to *tilt his head in confusion* to the man’s liking.

That, however, is behind him. All he has left are a couple of scene reshoots- with different dialogue- but after that, he’s done for the day. He almost laugh at how he's trying to cope with the prospect of another three or four hours of work.

He' free for now, at least. He chills outside his trailer, enjoying the early winter breeze on his skin. Others might call him crazy, but he’s from the midwest. Winter in California is like Summer to him. If he thought the costume department wouldn’t tear him a new one, he’d strip down to his undershirt and slip on some shorts.

As he’s going over his new lines on his sides, he hears a distinct giggle coming from nearby. Remembering suddenly what he and Kenji were hoping to accomplish today, he quickly pockets the papers and quietly sneaks around the different trailers. He passes Kenji’s, noting it’s dark inside. He must still be filming his other dailies right now.

After a minute, he finds what he finds the source of the laughter. He was hoping it was Brooklynn, and that he and Kenji might be one step closer in figuring her and Dairus out. Wishful thinking, but hey- he needs a little excitement after spending the last hour doing the same dialogue over and over.

Instead of his pink haired co-star, he finds Yaz, leaning against a trailer. And she's not alone, oh no. She's leaning over Sammy, who's back is against the trailer. They're so close, their faces are merely inches away from each other. The pair talk in hushed tones, but at times, Yaz will lean in and say something, prompting Sammy to giggle. Apparently, it was the Texan he heard earlier.

Ben could excuse all this as friendly. Platonic. Innocent. Just because they're chatting within kissing distance doesn't mean anything, right? He has no reason to think there's anything going on anyway. Kenji said he and Brooklynn straight up asked them at one point and the pair denied being anything more than friends.

And when Sammy leans up and kisses Yaz square on the lips, who then blushes and freezes up, earning her another giggle from the other girl, Ben is suddenly reminded of rule number one of celebrity gossip- take everything with a grain of salt.

Holy crap.

He wanted to snoop on Darius and Brooklynn. Somehow, he found out about Yaz and Sammy.

His first instinct is to find Kenji and blab. But as the rush of discovering something shocking wears off, he realizes that would not be a good idea. For one, that'd essentially be outing Yaz and Sammy, something Ben will not do intentionally. Secondly, if he leaves right now, there's a good chance they'll notice he's here, and that's a confrontation he'd rather avoid if possible. So, what is he to do? Hide until they leave? Make a run for it and hope for the best?

The decision is made for him when his phone rings. Loudly.

“What-” He can hear Yaz say. Ben doesn’t stick around for them to find him, hightailing it back to his trailer and closing the door firmly behind him. It isn’t until his heart stops thundering in his chest does he even contemplate moving from the door. Despite the cool weather outside, he's sweating bullets.

He trudges to his couch, grabs a towel from the kitchenette to wipe off, then plops himself down. It occurs to him he’s going to get an earful from the makeup department when he goes back, but better *that* than getting caught by his friends for spying on them like some kind of paps. Though, it would be just their luck if there *was* a paps nearby who saw them as well. Hopefully not.

His phone is still buzzing in his pocket, the thing now on silent-ring. Grumbling to himself, he pulls the thing out to see who’s calling.

It’s his mom.

“Hey, Ma.” He says, picking up immediately.

“Hi, honey! You weren’t filming, were you? Oh gosh, I interrupted, didn’t I?”

You interrupted something, he thinks.

“Nah, I've got a break right now. Just hanging out in my trailer. I've gotta head back later, though.”

“Oh, good! I’m glad I caught you, then. We haven’t chatted in a little while, huh?”

Is... is that right? Now that he thinks about it, he hasn’t called home in almost three weeks. He’d like to excuse it as he was too busy, but a lot of his free time was spent hanging out with the gang or with Kenji. Granted, she hasn’t called him in just as long, but as you heard, it's probably because she didn’t want to interrupt his work. Sheepishly, he speaks up.

“Yeah… sorry about that.”

“Oh, don’t be sorry. I know how busy you are with your new film and… other stuff.” She says the last part coyly, and all of a sudden, he’s sweaty again.

“Yeah, we’re in the home stretch here, heh. Really… busy.” He replies lamely. The line goes quiet for a second, and he fears they accidentally disconnected. When he notices they haven’t, he listens carefully and hears her sigh softly.

“Ben Fitzgerald Pincus.”

Uh oh. She only uses his full name when he’s in trouble. She doesn’t sound particularly mad, but he still gets the feeling this conversation won’t be all that pleasant.

“Yes, Ma?”

“Why did I have to find out through a magazine **you’re gay?”**

Oh.

She must have read the new ML issue. Ben completely forgot all about it- and the fact that he all but *screamed* at Tim Murphy that he’s gay. The issue came out a little while ago, and he isn't the type to buy copies of magazines he's in. That whole situation hasn’t had any consequences as far as he can tell, so it didn't occur to him that he's officially out now.

How could he forget that his mother, his biggest fan and avid collector of all things related to him, would read it? She probably has ten copies of the thing.

If he's being honest, he's surprised she hadn't found out sooner. He tried to be subtle over the years, sure, but throughout his career, there were moments where she must have questioned it- even heard other rumors, and just ones involving Kenji.

The time he spent after his Amazon adventure comes to mind…

--

-years ago-

Brazil is somewhere Ben feels he can call 'home away from home.' The people, the culture- not to mention the lush amount of nature that sprawls the entire country. All of it just resonates with him, and so far, he's enjoyed his time here to the fullest.

Filming for 'The Lost Temple' is almost over, and Ben is days away from flying back to the states. His last scene is being filmed tomorrow, and then it's Tchau to this place he's called home for months.

Ben isn't exactly the lead or anything, but his name will be bold on the movie poster just like his more famous co-stars.

One of whom is the gorgeous Oscar. Just Oscar, no last name. Kind of like 'Brooklynn.'

Oscar is a Brazilian actor who plays the ex-mercenary tour guide of the group's misadventure. Honestly, the plot of the movie is a bit convoluted, but it's sure to be a fun time regardless. Since this was Ben's first time filming away from home and without a chaperone,

Oscar kind of took it upon himself to watch over him. He's only a few years older, but he really took Ben under his wing.

The guy is tall, with long brunette hair, a well kept beard, and no small amount of muscles. He's been in the industry just as long as Ben, but his CV is much more impressive. In Brazil, he's pretty much the golden boy, but despite this, he's probably one of the most down to earth people Ben has ever met. They even share a fear- large birds. They don't have too much in common, but that's alright with Ben.

If it wasn't obvious yet, but kind of has a small crush on the guy. He's not delusional enough to say he has feelings and wants to be with him or anything like that, but he's not bad looking and he's always nice to Ben. He's always nice to everyone.

Now, why did Ben bring up his gorgeous costar? Because said gorgeous costar has pretty much cornered him in his hotel room balcony and is very much flirting with him.

At first Ben was startled- he never would have guessed this guy swung his way, nor that he would at all be interested in him. But, for whatever reason, his man's face is inches away from his ear, whispering to him, the words sending chills down his spine.

"I didn't want you to leave Brazil before I said something."

"Like what?"

"I always notice you looking my way."

"Oh?" Ben says coyly.

“You’re hard to miss. Your eyes are big, blue, and very beautiful.”

“Really?”

“You doubt this?” Oscar asks amused.

“No… I’m just not used to this kind of attention.”

“Oh? None of your past lovers have told you how handsome you are?”

“Ha. I’ve only ever had *one* in my life. And frankly, I’d rather not talk about him right now.”

“Hmm, his loss.” Oscar inches closer, his lips now brushing Ben’s ear. It’s ticklish, and it takes everything in his power not to giggle. Somehow, though, he thinks Oscar might like it if he did. The guy’s hands become bolder, holding Ben’s waist. A part of him is aware that they could be spotted like this- they *are* on an open balcony. But from how good he’s feeling, Ben doesn’t really mind. He just closes his eyes, prepared to let whatever happens happen.

A dopey grin, manicured hair, and strong arms flash into Ben’s mind. The guy he’s imagining also liked to whisper things to Ben, and it always delighted Ben when they’d get caught up in their own private conversations. He’d hold Ben, keeping him nice and warm, and they’d talk for hours like this- shared whispers of nothing in particular.

'Disgusting.' ‘Freak.’

Almost violently, Ben rips himself away from Oscar, and rushes into his room. The other stands at the balcony, confused at his outburst. Ben immediately searches for one of his stashes of hand sanitizer, and pours a heavy dollop before rubbing into his skin.

“Ben? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He answers quickly, contemplating using up the whole bottle.

“Was it something I said?”

“What? No, no. I um-” Ben wills himself to throw the thing back into his fanny pack. “I just remembered I hadn’t showered yet, and I guess I was feeling… unclean.”

“Oh. I don’t mind if-”

“Well, *I* do.” He responds curtly.

“Oh. Okay. I apologize.” Oscar looks away, confusion still plain on his face. Ben feels bad for acting this way, but so far, this isn’t really something he’s been able to control.

“No, you’re fine. Look, um, I’m really tired. I think after a shower, I’m going to go to bed.”

“Alright. Well, enjoy your evening.” Oscar takes his leave, stopping at the door to give Ben a final smoldering grin. “I’ll be on set tomorrow to watch your last scene.”

“Yeah, see you.”

The second the door closes, Ben sits himself on the ground and tries to breathe as calmly and evenly as he can manage.

Kenji never made him have these attacks directly, but after their falling out, Ben has moments where he feels the need to get clean. Since he doesn’t want to risk another incident where he scratches at his arms until they bleed, he carries around hand sanitizer. He has stashes of the stuff in every bag he brought with him.

He hadn’t thought of Kenji the whole time he was here, until tonight. The guy was out of sight, and out of mind.

Ben hates the idea that he can’t have a love life without thinking of his ex- nor is he fond of the idea that he can’t deal with it without carrying around sanitizer.

Maybe when he gets back to the states, he should hire a shrink or something.

--

Filming wrapped up well, and the crew sent Ben off with a warm farewell. The other actors bought him a small cake they all shared, but

soon enough, he was back at the hotel, getting his bags packed for the journey back home.

If you're wondering, he and Oscar didn't say much. In fact, the guy seemed to treat him differently- more friendlike than anything. It was weird, but Ben guessed it was because of how awkward the night before went.

He didn't really bring all that much with him, so packing took less than an hour. He decides to splurge and order a feast of local foods. Within an hour, he has a smorgasbord laid out. The staff were nice enough to bring him a magazine and newspaper as well.

As he ate, Ben browsed the paper, looking more at the pictures than anything. He's picked up enough Portuguese during his time here to not get lost on the streets, but he really doesn't know enough to read and understand.

He switches to the magazine, both delighted and offended that it seemed to be a trashy gossip rag. It's filled with both Brazilian and American celebrities. To his horror, he finds a familiar couple featured in one of the articles- he just ignores it.

Then he comes to one that has him choking on his Acaraje.

A picture of himself and Oscar looking very intimate on his balcony. The picture isn't all that clear, but it's enough for him to recognize the two in it. Ben scans the article, trying to decipher as much as he can. He ends up using a translation app, which contains a lot of grammatical errors, but is able to get the gist of it.

Ben isn't all that famous. He's definitely coming up in the world, but from what he can tell, the paps who took the photo and wrote the

article seem to think Oscar took another adoring fan to his bed. That, or, they think Ben is a cow who got lost on his way to the soccer field. Yeah, based on the context, Ben is going with the first translation.

He's grateful for his lack of status in this instance. First of all, he'd hate to be outed in such a way. What if it made its way back home?. Knowing his mom, she might find the magazine and keep a copy. What a conversation that would be. Second, he feels he dodged a bullet- he wouldn't want to just be another notch in Oscar's bedpost, handsome or not.

Maybe the guy saw it already, which would explain his strange behavior on set.

In any case, Ben is just happy that it seems he can leave without any drama following him.

One day, he hopes, he can come out properly. Until then, he'll try to be more discreet.

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-Present-

"Ben? You still there?" Her voice cuts through the haze, bringing him back to the present- and to the conversation he was dreading to have.

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry."

“I’m still waiting for an answer.”

Of course she is.

“I hadn’t even meant to say that in the interview. It just kind of happened.”

“According to the article, you kind of screamed it at the interviewer.” She laughs. In the back of his mind, he’s glad she’s taking it well-considering the conversation they’re having. Still, it does nothing to settle his nerves.

“When did you read it?” He asks. His mom sighs, probably over the fact he’s deflecting her question.

“Couple nights ago. I would have earlier, but I got swamped at work.”

“Oh, what’s going on? You doing another conversion?” He asks, hoping to distract her with work talk.

She’s an accountant and works for the biggest bank in Illinois. Back when she lived with him in Cali, she did freelance accounting gigs that allowed her to be on set with him during filming. It was a hard time for her, but she never once complained.

Though he’s *totally not* using it as a way to deflect, he’s always down to let her vent about work. He owes her at least that much.

“Nope, just another big account having a semi-crisis. Nothing new.

But, we're getting off topic." She says firmly.

Shoot.

"I-I know. Um, I had always wanted to tell you, but…" He hesitates.

"But?" She presses, her voice soft.

"I don't know." he sighs. "After dad died, I knew things were hard. But you were so strong, you never let it show how much you were struggling. You even encouraged me to pursue acting, even if it meant we had to leave home. You've done so much for me… I guess-"

"You were afraid of how I'd react." She finishes for him.

"Yeah."

"Sweetie, you could have told me."

"I know that now… You're the only family I have, ma. I just didn't wanna lose you too."

"Oh, my sweet boy… you'd never lose me. Not over something like this, baby."

God, he had this conversation in his head over and over growing up. There were times he'd be pessimistic, and imagined she'd disown him or something. Sometimes, he'd imagine she'd just brush it off, act like

she hadn't heard him right and pretend he's straight. He'd always hoped she'd react just like how she is now.

"I'm sorry." He gets out, feeling his throat tighten up.

"Don't be sorry, Ben. I understand why you didn't tell me, but I want you to know that you can tell me anything. And that I love you, no matter what."

"Me too, Ma. I love ya." He chokes out. He refuses to actually cry, worried he may ruin his makeup further, but from how full his heart feels, it may not be up to him.

"And don't take this the wrong way, but I kind of always knew..."

"Of course you did." he smiles.

"So, now that we got that outta the way, lemme tell you about work, because last week was HELL."

He laughs, releasing all the emotions he was holding in. She joins him. He knew she'd want to talk about that.

They chat for a few minutes more- about work, how filming is going, if she can come down for the premier. When he notices the digital clock on his microwave, he's quick to wrap it up.

"Sorry, Ma. I gotta head back soon."

“Okay, sweetie. Don’t let our calls become only a monthly thing, okay?”

“I’ll make sure to call you next week. I promise.”

“Alright. Oh, and say hi to Kenji for me.”

“Will do, Ma.”

“You two should come up here one weekend. I’d love to have a family dinner, the three of us.”

…

What??

Before he can ask her what she meant by that, there’s a knock on his trailer door. She must have heard it because she continues.

“Oh, sounds like you gotta go. Talk later! Love you!”

“Wai-”

Before he can even finish his word, she hangs up. He has half a mind to call her back, but another round of knocking sounds.

“Coming!”

He straightens out his costume and throws the soiled towel in the sink to wash later. When he opens the door, he’s greeted not by an AD or PA, but Kenji, a bag and a couple of drinks in hand.

“Sup, babe? Were you sleeping?”

“Oh, hey. Nah, I was just on the phone.” Ben chirps, still a bit on edge.

“Cool. Hey, I got my assistant to get us some grub from a nearby burger joint. Can’t beat Kirby’s, but I hear they’re pretty good.”

Ben has never been into burgers, but Kenji can never get enough. Besides, he was feeling pretty hungry anyway and wasn't looking forward to going all the way to crafty to eat real quick.

“Sounds good.” He says, a hint of reluctance in his voice. Kenji smiles as walks past him into the trailer.

“Don’t worry, babe. I got you the chicken salad.”

For the second time in ten minutes, Ben’s heart is full.

As they eat, Ben chooses not to tell Kenji about anything that happened. Not about catching Yaz and Sammy, nor his conversation with his mom. He doesn’t want to think about any of that before he

has to go back on set. Instead, he and Kenji talk about the kind of BS Wu had them do and what kind of things he'll have them do later that evening.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Ben asks dubiously. Next to him, Kenji grins, nodding.

A couple of days after that conversation with his mom, Ben and Kenji finally have a 'solid' plan as to confront Darius and Brooklynn. He hasn't spilled about catching Yaz and Sammy, so Kenji has slowly become consumed with catching the other two.

So, what's the plan, you ask?

The camp fam are going to a theme park.

Yes, really.

It took some doing, but they were able to get everyone's schedules synced up for some downtime. When Ben first heard the news, he was hoping they could just have a small get together or go to the beach or something. But before he knew it, Kenji already had an entire scheme devised, and it all centered on the six of them going to the 'Hidden Adventure' theme park.

Throughout the day, they'll go on rides that'll take your picture, and Kenji is hoping that at some point, they'll slip up and be caught on camera. If nothing else, hanging out with them presents opportunities

for either of them to have a chat with their friends.

It’s not exactly the most solid of plans, but Ben has never been to a theme park before, so he didn't complain. He’s actually looking forward to it, even with his boyfriend using the outing as a cover for his snooping.

So here they are, standing outside the gates, waiting for everyone else to show up. It’s late afternoon, with only a few hours until the park closes. It’s also the middle of the week with schools not out for winter break yet. Meaning, the amount of people here will be virtually nonexistent. Their disguises are just sunglasses and hats- nothing too elaborate.

If Ben is being honest, he sort of dressed up for the day. He may be all about comfort and practicality during his time off, but this is kind of a date. If he and Kenji are right about their friends, it’s actually a double date.

Yaz and Sammy show up not too long after, the pair arriving together and in matching outfits- pink and purple knitted sweaters with their initials on them. When Ben points this out, he swears they both blush.

“Oh, my mom made them for us.” Sammy explains.

“Yeah, when I visited Texas for the holidays one year, Mrs Gutierrez was kind enough to make me one too.”

“Oh, stop. You know you can call her Camila. She hates it when you call her ‘Mrs Gutierrez.’” Sammy laughs, Yaz sharing the sentiment.

Ben glances at Kenji, and finds that his boyfriend had the same inclination- a knowing look on his face. Oh, how he wishes he could tell him.

It suddenly occurs to Ben that, if they're right about Brooklynn and Darius, this is essentially a triple date. If they're lucky, maybe Kenji can catch Yaz and Sammy as well and he can finally talk to him about it. Though, something tells Ben the other is going to be too busy trying to catch the other two that he won't focus on the ones who are blatantly a couple.

Brooklynn and Darius are the last to arrive, the pair *not* in matching outfits. Not necessarily a dent in Kenji's theory, but Ben finds himself a little disappointed. He notices, however, that Brooklynn is wearing that ring that started that rumor of her and Kenji being 'engaged' all that time ago. He hasn't seen her wear it on set the past several weeks, so it's noteworthy in his book.

When they get inside, there is hardly anyone around, which is perfect for them. Trying to keep a low profile would make having fun harder.

First stop- the ‘Haunted Tunnels’. He didn’t know this place had this kind of attraction, and he can’t say he’s looking forward to it. But, Kenji is convinced that a little ‘horror’ is just what they need to get everyone comfy. The others are also confused why he wants to go there when there’s rides to go on, but after some minor goading by Kenji, Yaz practically drags them in herself.

It’s just as scary as he thought it’d be, if not a little cheesy. There wasn’t a moment he wasn’t holding on to Kenji in front of him, who himself was clinging onto Sammy. In fact, he’s sure the six of them were hanging on to each other like a conga line of chickens. The picture taken at the end confirmed as much.

“Y’all, this picture is precious.” Sammy coos as she looks over her overpriced print of them.

“We look so dumb.” Brooklynn smiles.

“I don’t know. I think we look great. Especially the big guy over here.” Yaz snickers as she points out Kenji, who looks a few shades paler, his mouth wide as he screams in terror. The taller man in question just rolls his eyes and playfully nudges her.

The coaster is next- the only ride with a line. They made sure to don their caps and glasses as they waited, but the other patrons seemed occupied by their own conversations to care. Ben was hoping they’d be able to pair off when they rode it, but the attendant practically shoved him in the same car next to Brooklynn, while Kenji ended up with Darius.

Disappointment must have been plain on his face, because Brooklynn nudges him as they start the initial ascent.

“Hey, don’t worry. Maybe we can get in line again and you and Kenji can ride together.”

“That obvious, huh?” He guesses sheepishly.

“Ehh, I get it. I’d want to ride with my boyfriend, too. Typical date stuff, y’know?”

Oh. Is this an opening…?

“Totally. So, you have one?”

“One what?” She asks, confused.

“A boyfriend.”

Her eyes dart around nervously, though she makes it a point not to meet his gaze. She smiles, and laughs to herself.

“And I thought I was the inquisitive one.”

“You don’t gotta answer,” he assures her. “Was just wondering. You seemed more upbeat lately, so I figured there might be a reason.”

She doesn’t say anything to that, but her expression does seem to relax. At least he didn’t make this too awkward.

All thoughts of that conversation leave the second they reach the top and start barrelling through the track, the only thing he can focus on is not screaming too hard.

Afterwards, they head to the carnival games. Yaz, of course, ends up being great every single one. By the end, all of them end up with some kind of prize. Kenji won him a stuffed brachiosaurus, the thing goofy looking and adorable. He named her Firecracker.

They stop for snacks, the place loaded with options. Most of them go for the more savory stuff, but Ben went straight for the dried mangoes. He makes a note to bring Bumpy here one day- She loves mangoes.

While they eat, he tells Kenji of his brief conversation with Brooklynn. The guy barely reacted beyond a pursing of his lips, which surprised him. He thought Kenji would be more interested.

Next up is the Gyrospheres- a weird bubble thing that can travel in any direction, holding two people each. Not the most conventional ride, but Darius was excited to try it out, so everyone was okay with going. It turns out to be a race with obstacles in their path, a special prize waiting for whoever wins.

When it came time to get into the things, Ben is surprised to see Kenji get in the one with Brooklynn. He can see his boyfriend smile and throw him a thumbs up through the clear glass ball, before the two are sealed in.

For some reason, a vague sense of doom starts to build in him.

“C’mon Ben! It’s gonna close soon!” Darius calls to him, his co-pilot seat wide open. Sammy and Yaz are in their own Gyro next to them.

Darius takes the helm, and the two speed away. It’s actually pretty fun, if not a little terrifying. You can actually bump into other spheres, but it’s safe. Sammy in particular took to bumping into everyone. In the end, none of them won, but Ben and Darius were the first among them to cross the finish line.

The last to arrive altogether was Brooklynn and Kenji’s- and by a lot. Ben didn’t notice, but from how long it took, it seemed they stopped at some point during the race.

The second the sphere opens, the pink haired girl storms off in a hurry.

Oh, Ben's instincts were right.

“B, I didn’t mean- Brooklynn!” Kenji calls after her, a worried look on his face.

The rest of them look on in confusion. Yaz and Sammy go after her while Darius stays with them. The younger man seems extremely worried, ready to chase after the girls, but he trains his attention on Kenji instead.

“Hey, what the heck happened?” He asks the taller man directly.

“I- I don’t know! We were just talking a little, and then she got upset.”

“Well, what were you talking about?” Darius presses.

“We were just catching up! Honest!” Kenji puts his hands up defensively. The shorter man inhales sharply, pinches the bridge of his nose, then exhales loudly.

“Okay, okay. Look, I’m gonna go check on her.” Darius starts to walk in the direction the girls went, and Kenji starts following behind. Quickly, Ben grabs his boyfriend's arm and calls out to the other.

“We’ll be back by the food stalls. Meet us there after?” Darius gives them a wave, then he’s off.

Kenji looks down at him confused. Ben grimaces up at him.

“I don’t think we should interfere right now, you know?”

“But-”

“C’mon. I’ll treat us to some ice cream?”

Kenji looks like he wants to protest- to break free of Ben’s grip and follow Darius. But, as Kenji has pointed out before, Ben’s grip is strong, and frankly, he doesn’t want things to get worse. Especially since they’re in public right now and Ben is half-convinced someone heard him loudly call out their mononymous friend’s name.

After a moment, Kenji hangs his head in defeat and nods. Changing his grip, Ben slides down until he's holding the taller man’s hand, and the two head towards the food area.

The pair end up getting chocolate ice cream- not Ben’s favorite, but it is Kenji’s. He finished his minutes ago, while the other is still picking away at it. He was hoping this would prove somewhat distracting, but he should have known better.

“So,” Ben starts. “What did you two talk about?”

“We were catching up, like I said.” Kenji mumbles.

“That’s what you told Darius. But you’re talking to me. C’mon, spill.”

“Why do you assume I’m lying?” Kenji quips.

“I’m not. I’m saying you’re being vague and *something* obviously set Brooklynn off.” Ben pushes. Kenji frowns at that. Soon enough, he sticks his spoon in his melting bowl of ice cream and slinks a bit in his seat.

“I… kind of asked her if Darius gave her that ring she’s wearing.”

Oh. Ben honestly had the same thought, but he didn’t think to outright ask like Kenji did.

“And that set her off?”

“Well, kind of? I said I was cool with it if it was, but she got a little defensive.”

“Did you say anything else after that?”

“I-I might have asked her straight up if they were together.”

“Alright, and?”

“She actually admitted to it. Kind of surprised me, but she didn’t seem bothered all that much."

Oh. Cool. After Kenji questioned if Ben saw them correctly, he had his doubts about those two actually being a couple. Now that it's confirmed, he can finally be happy for them. If nothing else, he's happy his boyfriend finally got the answer he wanted. So, why did it end up with Brooklynn storming off?

"So, what happened? If it didn't bother her-"

"Well, I was gonna leave it at that, but then…"

Oh, no. Ben can see where this is going.

“Don’t tell me you asked-”

“Then I asked if she was sneaking around with him while we were still together.”

There it is. Damn it, he had a weird feeling the second those two got in the gyro together, and look what happened. He can’t blame his boyfriend for asking since he’s been dying to do that since the day they caught them, but he also can’t blame Brooklynn for getting upset at such an accusatory question.

“Why’d you phrase it that way?” Ben groans.

“I know, I know! Ergh, I’m so stupid! I- I didn’t mean anything by it, I just wanted an honest answer.”

“And did you get one?”

“No…” Kenji bemoans. “She took over and we got to the end, and the second the thing opened, she ran off.”

“Can’t say I blame her…”

“God, I messed up.” Kenji droops his head so it smacks the table lightly. He stays like that, looking perfectly defeated.

“Can’t argue with that.”

“You’re so supportive, babe.” The taller man deadpans.

“I’ve been in your position before, Kenji. I know you just wanted to know what was going on. And, I know you were hoping to use today to get to the bottom of things, but to everyone else, this was supposed to be a fun day out.”

“I messed up their day too, huh?” Kenji says sadly, raising his head off the table.

“Well, I had fun. I’m sure the others did too. The ending is just… not what we expected.”

“I should go apologize.”

“Maybe not right now. She’ll come around… eventually.”

A couple of minutes later, Ben gets a call from Sammy.

“Hey, would y’all mind if we headed home already? Yaz and I are gonna take Brooklynn with us.”

“Okay. The park is gonna close pretty soon anyway. Um, but what about Darius?”

“Well, he drove him and Brooklynn here, so he’s just gonna go back by himself.”

“Oh, uh, do you think you could tell him to wait at the exit? I’ll meet him there.”

He can hear Sammy put the phone to her shoulder, her voice muffled. Soon enough, she’s coming through clearly again.

“He said he would.”

“Great, thanks. We’ll see you guys later.”

“Alrighty. Tell Kenji we said bye, too!” She says as she hangs up. Kenji looks at him expectantly.

“Sammy said she and Yaz will bring Brooklynn home. Darius is gonna wait for me at the exit.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I um, I think I should talk to him.”

“Oh.” Kenji says a little dejectedly. Ben is quick to reach out to his boyfriend, holding his hand.

“Hey, I’ll meet you back at your place after, okay? I’ll have him drop me off there. Promise.”

Kenji doesn’t respond with words, but he does squeeze Ben’s hand back.

Kenji went ahead and drove home alone. As much as Ben would like to have gone with him to keep his boyfriend from spiraling, he gets the feeling another one of his friends might need to bend his ear more.

Said friend is waiting exactly where he asked him to.

“Hey, D.”

“Hey, Ben. You didn’t want to go home with Kenji?”

“I was hoping we could talk a little. And, if you wouldn’t mind, could you drop me off at his place?”

“Sure, man.”

The pair relocate to a nearby bench. The sun has already set, though the area is alight with the flashing lights of the park’s entrance and a few streetlights around them. It’s a bit cold out, but both of them have scarves and hats they brought with them. They also both have stuffed dinosaurs their respective partners won them.

Ben had every intention of being subtle about everything- ask innocent questions that hopefully lead to a deeper conversation. But to his surprise, Darius starts talking unprompted.

“She’s fine, if you’re wondering. Just… caught off guard by what Kenji asked.”

“I’m sorry by the way. He was so curious and didn’t think about how to phrase his question.”

“Neither of us are mad. And, honestly, it’s a valid question.”

“I mean, is it?” Ben starts. He isn’t sure if Darius knows that Brooklynn and Kenji’s relationship was fake for the last few years, but maybe that’s naivete on his part. At the very least, he can probe the other. “You know about their… previous arrangement, right?”

“Of course I do. She tells me everything.” Darius smiles at that, his gaze distant. “I mean, I didn’t know from the beginning, but she told me eventually. I’m guessing Kenji told you?”

“A few days ago.” Ben admits.

“Sorry I didn’t tell you at Yaz’s party. After hearing your whole story, I wasn't sure telling you was the right thing to do.” Darius apologizes. Ben is quick to dismiss it.

“It was better I heard about it from him. Besides, he had a lot of other things to tell me about our time apart anyway.” Darius nods in understanding. “If you don’t mind me asking… when did you two get together?”

“Almost a year ago.” The other tells him confidently. “She told me Kenji was thinking about ending their ‘relationship’ and joked about how she’d have to actually learn how to date. And then… I kind of just confessed right there.”

“Wow. You did not waste any time.” Ben says, a little impressed.

“At first, she kind of just laughed it off, but eventually, we started spending a lot more time together, and one thing led to another. She and Kenji hadn’t ‘officially’ broken up yet, but we made sure not to get caught.”

“Smart. Though, maybe you should have told her not to wear that ring you bought her outside.”

“I did! But you know Brooklynn- she’ll do what she wants. Wait… how did you know I got her that?”

“A guess.” Ben shrugs.

“Well, you and Kenji aren’t all that subtle either, just so you know.”

“Point taken.” A thought just occurs to Ben. "I have to ask, why didn't you two just announce your relationship? Or at the very least, tell us? Or even just Kenji?"

"For the same reason you and Kenji haven't, I imagine. The media would probably twist it until we're all villains. I mean, it really isn't anyone's business, but I... if nothing else, I didn't want Kenji caught up in all of it."

Ben wants to spill. He wants to tell Darius about his boyfriend's insecurities and worries and everything regarding his and Brooklynn's relationship. But those aren't things he should be sharing without Kenji's approval. Besides, he'd hate to deprive the two of them from a 'bro talk' or whatever.

Still, he has some advice for the other.

"Y'know someone once told me that hiding a relationship puts unnecessary strain on the couple." Darius playfully rolls his eyes, hearing his words turned against him. "I hope one day me and Kenji can be open. Judging from people's reactions to just a kiss, that day might not be soon. Not to put too fine a point on it, but you and Brooklynn going public would make it easier on us."

"I-I know. I'll definitely think about it. But, right now, with Brooklynn and what happened today-"

"I know." Ben interrupts. "And I'll make sure to talk to Kenji."

A lull takes over, and Ben wonders if this is where their conversation ends. He's proven wrong when Darius turns to him, looking a little nervous.

"I know I should talk to Kenji myself, but since you're going to talk to him anyway-"

"Nope, like you said, you should talk to him yourself."

"Ben, dude. C'mon." Darius pleads.

"Nope." Ben insists. There needs to be a proper conversation between those two, and between Brooklynn and Kenji as well. Ben will not play intermediary, especially since this can so easily turn messy.

Darius doesn't look too happy about this, so Ben continues.

"He's not mad at either of you."

"Really? I think I would be, in his shoes."

Yeah, they really need to talk

"Believe me, I get it. But he really isn't." Ben hesitates, but there's something he wants to get off his chest. Hopefully, Darius hears him out. "He's a better man than me. This is gonna sound horrible, but… I kind of resented Brooklynn for the last few years."

Darius looks at him, his eyes focused. He doesn't say a word, expecting Ben to continue.

"I don't now of course… but a part of me is still mad. I mean, neither of them could tell me it was fake? I was so bitter, I refused to be anywhere near them. And then learning they kept it going for appearances?"

"I know. I um… I get how you feel." Darius sighs. "Well, I didn't go through what you did, but I know what it's like to see them together and feeling… unhappy."

"You've liked her since our Camp days, huh?" Ben guesses.

"Over time, yeah. At one point I was going to confess, but then I saw her and Kenji kissing off camera and… yeah."

"Don't get me started on that." Ben huffs. "But, it worked out in the end. It took some time, but we both got who we wanted."

"Yeah."

Another lull comes before Ben continues.

"I mean it- Kenji isn't mad. The situation overall is weird, but when you talk to him, I think you'll see why."

"Okay. Maybe not right away."

Hey, it’s a start.

The two chat for a little while more, Darius telling him stories of things he and Brooklynn have done. By the time they leave the park, a lot of the staff are leaving.

“Thanks for the ride, D.” Ben says as he exits the other’s car. They’re right outside of Kenji’s building.

“Anytime, man.”

“You gonna visit Brooklynn after?”

“Nah, Sammy and Yaz are with her tonight. Not gonna intrude.”

“Alright. Drive home safe!”

Ben waits for Darius to drive to the end of the street before heading in.

At this point, the building security knows Ben well enough that he doesn’t need to be screened. There is one guard that can’t for the life of him remember his three letter name, but Ben doesn’t mind since he’s the friendliest out of them. Thankfully he's on duty and he just waves Ben on as he calls the elevator. Ben notes that the other

elevator is being worked on by repair crew and is thankful the one that stops at Kenji's place is working.

He's not sure what he's going to tell Kenji, if anything. As much as he wants the two best friends to makeup, he knows it's probably best to let them do it on their own. Though, knowing how hard headed the both of them can be, he may have to intervene at some point. After such a hectic day, he'd rather put it off, hoping that he and Kenji can just have a normal evening.

The second the elevator door dings, he’s greeted with the sight of Kenji holding someone by their collar against the wall, the man’s hands up submissively.

It takes Ben a moment, but all of a sudden, the recognition hits him like a brick.

The suit and tie is unmistakable, and so too is the vaguely smug look on his face. His hair has grayed some since he last saw him, but there is no mistaking who Kenji is currently holding-

Kenji's father, Daniel Kon.

What the hell did he just walk into…?

Chapter End Notes

Teenage Blues by Vistas

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thank you for reading!

First of all, I apologize for taking so long to update. This chapter isn't even all that long compared to the last two, but it still took me a bunch of time to get it typed out.

I don't want to get too into details, but I had moved temporarily, and not for fun reasons. I was able to chip away at this since I brought my work laptop with me, but most of my time was occupied helping my dad recuperate. He's doing better, and I'm finally home now! I have way more time to work on this, so updates should be more frequent! Thank you for your patience (and your comments!)

If you're wondering who Oscar is, he's a character from the Jurassic World: Live Tour. I got to see it in Portland before I left and it was great! They even had a real life Bumpy to take pictures with! (Oscar, like Ben, is accosted by Pteranadons and presumed dead, so I though it'd be funny if they interacted) I lowkey wanna make some art of the characters from it, but we'll see lol

No promises, but since I've already got a small chunk of it already typed out, look for Chapter 12 on Sunday, 7/9!
EDIT:

Hi! Thanks so much for reading! I need to be honest, I'm a little burnt out with writing this. Chapter 12 is 70% done, but I have other things- other ideas I want to put out there. So, this is not goodbye, but I am putting this temporarily on hiatus.

For transparency, I want to write a fic about Ben and Kenji at the Hidden Adventure as part of my Lingering Stare series and add 1-2 Chapters to Secret Melodies so I can fix a pacing issue I think the fic has. Plus, I really want to start drawing again, so I might focus on doing the comic-inserts for this fic again.

EDIT: I AM ALIVE lol I'm working real hard on getting chapter 12

done, and it almost is! idk exactly when it'll be posted, but just know I'm no longer on hiatus! :)

The Only Exception

Chapter Summary

Kenji's past continues to catch up with him.

Chapter Notes

cw//minor character death mention, mild violence, mental health discussion

Hello! Sorry this took so long! More on that in the end notes!

I hope you enjoy!

Kenji POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How could today get any worse?

As soon as Kenji stepped into his home, he threw off all his outerwear and left a pile of clothes by the door. Today of all days, the stupid elevator had to break down. The repair guys said it'd only take another hour, but he wasn't going to wait in the lobby that long. In retrospect, maybe he should have, because climbing five flights of stairs in winter garb certainly didn't make for a pleasant time.

He barely made it to his bedroom before shedding the rest of his clothes, the sweaty garments lying forgotten on his floor. The second he entered his walk-in shower, he cranked it to the coldest possible setting, a sigh turning into a shudder as the freezing water washed over him.

Several minutes later, he emerged refreshed, but not feeling all that much better. Ignoring the clothes on the ground for now, Kenji slips on some loose fitting garments, trudges to the living room, and patiently waits for Ben.

No TV, no music, no phone. Just waiting. Of course, with nothing to distract him, his brain decides to fill the time by going over everything that went wrong today.

Asking his friends to go to a theme park with ulterior motives was already scummy, but then he had to go and ruin it for everyone with his big mouth. The day was going fine- great, even! They were all having fun, Kenji included, but as time went on, he started getting antsy. The entire point of the outing was so he could catch Brooklynn and Darius in the act and finally confront them about their secret relationship. He just kept getting swept up with all the fun they were having and missed his chance again and again.

On the coaster, he came close to straight up asking Darius, but he just chickened out (more likely is that he was too busy screaming his head off).

Since he was running out of time and options, he all but shoved Brooklynn into the same gyrosphere as him, ready to use the ride to confront her. The ride lasts as long as the pace the driver sets. Knowing this, he took the reins and kept them at a snail's pace, much to the pink-haired girl's annoyance.

"Dude, Darius and Ben just passed us. We can't lose to *them."* The comment made him laugh. Though, from the corner of his eye, he saw she hadn't joined him. "Are you trying to throw this? Just let me dr-"

"No way, B. Slow and steady beats the crap out of rabbits or whatever." He said with nervousness. She easily saw through him, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Just guessing, but is there a particular reason we're going slower

than a grandma on a Sunday drive?"

"Actually, I wanted to talk a little. We haven't gotten to chat in a while." He said cryptically.

"We see each other on set pretty often, and we talk on the phone, like, once a week. But sure, we can talk. What's up?" Her gaze was unwavering, barely flinching when Kenji accidentally ran them into a tree cutout.

"So," He starts, "that ring you got."

"I've shown you it before, right? What about it?"

"Well, I haven't seen you wear it for a while. It must be special, I guess?"

She seemed to contemplate her answer, but after a moment, she shrugged.

"I mean, it's my favorite piece of jewelry, so yeah, it's special. I haven't worn it on set since I'd have to take it off anyway. Wouldn't want to lose it."

"Sure, sure. But, uh, where did you even get it? I mean, I've never really known you to wear jewelry to begin with so-"

"Is there a point you're trying to get to?"

“Did someone buy you that ring? Like, for example… Darius?”

Another bout of silence. He dared not look her way.

“So what if he did?” she replies, her tone somewhat defensive.

“I’m not trying to say anything! It’s cool that he did! The whole amber and wood thing seems like Darius’ kind of thing, so I just-”

“Put two and two together.” She finishes for him, sighing.

“Yeah…”

“Why do I feel like there’s another question you want to ask?”

“Yeah. Right. Um. I- I don’t really know how else to ask, so I’m just gonna come out with it.”

He took a deep breath, ready to finally get his answer.

“Are you and Darius seeing each other?” Kenji said that so fast, he’s unsure if she even understood, but judging from her pensive look and deafening silence, she probably did.

“Yeah. We are.” She admits.

…*He didn't think it was going to be* that *easy. Huh.*

"Oh. Uh, cool. I don't know why, but I half expected you to deny it or something."

"Why would I?" She laughed softly. "Nope. I'm 100% in a relationship with that nerd. I mean, we haven't gone public yet, but since it's you, I guess I don't mind."

Kenji doesn't respond to that, still in shock that she confirmed it outright. When he didn't say anything for a bit, Brooklynn spoke up.

"So now you know. Was this all just curiosity or…?"

"Oh, no real reason. Just, uh, wanted to know for sure since I had a hunch. Heh, congrats, B. I'm happy for you- for *both* of you." He amended.

"Thanks, Kenj." She said, genuine happiness in her voice. A rueful sigh followed. "Ugh, I guess we weren't as careful as we thought if *you* figured it out."

"Hey, I'll have you know, I'm very observant!" He said with indignance. "Besides, you guys are pretty hard to miss. Ben and I saw you two in that Korean BBQ place."

"Korean BBQ?"

“Yeah, on St. Andrews. We were having dinner there one night. Ben noticed you guys coming in and pointed you out to me.”

“St. Andrews? We’ve never been. Darius doesn't do well with the smoke, so we don’t eat at yakiniku restaurants. Wait-” She groaned and covered her face with her hands. “Does that mean I just…”

Yeah, he and Ben were wrong. It wasn’t the two of them that day. Honestly, this was such a Brooklynn way to have found this out, but instead of the pink-haired girl doing the snooping, she’s the one being snooped. Honestly, this whole thing is kind of ridiculous and he wanted to laugh.

He didn’t, though, since his pink-haired ex seemed upset.

“Hey, better to have told me yourself than me catching you two on set or something.”

“Hey, besides that one time *we* made out, I don’t do stuff on hot sets.” She rolled her eyes, but a tiny smile found her lips. “But, I guess you’re right. Geez, I can’t believe I blabbed.”

“Why are you guys hiding it, anyway?”

“I wouldn’t say we’re hiding. Just… being careful. Besides, *you’re* one to talk.”

“That’s different. Ben is worried about the press so-”

“Exactly. It’s the same for us.” She interrupted. “We don’t want the attention on our relationship to distract from the film. I’m sure Claire would think it would help, but I’d hate for people to assume it’s a publicity thing. We’re going to wrap pretty soon anyway. We can wait until after the premiere to go public.”

“Okay, okay, I get you.” He agreed.

Another bout of silence passed between them. Kenji still had some questions, but he doubted asking them would be such a good idea, considering. But, he reasoned, if he didn't ask right then, he might never ask.

“When did you two start dating?” He blurted out.

“Okay, I think that’s enough for today.” Brooklynn huffed. “We’re almost at the finish line. Let's at least beat Yaz and-”

“Was it while we were still together?”

“Kenji, it really isn’t-”

“It was, wasn’t it? How come you two snuck around instead of-”

Without warning, the girl took control of the steering stick and drove them recklessly to the finish line. Before he could process what happened, the door lock automatically disengaged and she stormed off. He tried calling after her- to explain himself better. In the end, everyone agreed it was for the best if he left her alone for now.

Ben stayed at the park so he could talk to Darius- for what reason, he couldn't guess- thus leaving Kenji to drive home alone. Well, alone but for his thoughts- which for Kenji is not really a good thing.

But alone is where he now finds himself; no Ben to keep him company or talk to. He can't call Darius or Brooklynn, his closest friends, because they're the ones he ticked off. Heck, he probably can't even call Yaz or Sammy because they're with Brooklynn right now.

All things considered, this is about all he can do for now- wait. The call of his bed is alluring, considering how physically and mentally drained he feels, and Kenji is never one to downplay the importance of a good night's rest.

'I'll meet you back at your place after, okay?'

He decides to continue to sit there and wait.

After about half an hour, and another round of self contemplation, he hears the elevator alarm- his warning that someone wants to come up to his floor. They must have finished repairs already. Sweet. He bolts up and rushes to the elevator door so fast, he almost trips over his end table. He presses the 'OK' button immediately, not bothering to talk with security. It's strange they even tried buzzing him, considering Ben is one of the few people on his 'OK to send up' list.

He's just so ready to see his boyfriend again. At least Ben got here much faster than Kenji thought he would. His chat with Darius must not have been that long- not that he's complaining. He hopes Ben is up for telling him what he and Darius did. Though, just chilling or going straight to bed would also be welcome plans.

Soon enough, the elevator doors begin to open and the fluorescent

light within pours into Kenji's hallway.

"Babe, how was-" He starts, smiling.

The words die in his throat when he sees who it actually is.

"Kenji? It's been a while."

Standing in front of him, in the same suit and tie he wore the last time they met in person years ago, is his father, Daniel Kon.

The man steps off the elevator, holding a plastic bag of what Kenji assumes is fruit. He can smell it- the scent citrusy and fragrant- but he doesn't look down to confirm. He can't seem to tear his eyes away from the face of the person standing in front of him.

The man's hair has greyed significantly, though still in his signature comb-back. He's always been on the lean side, but Kenji can tell he's lost some weight from how baggy his tailored suit now seems. Not only that, but his eyes are dark and a bit sunken. Maybe it's age, maybe it's a lack of sleep. Or, maybe he always looked this way and Kenji didn't notice until now.

If there's one word Kenji would use to describe him, it would be 'tired.'

"Kenji?" His dad says again. "What's wrong, son?"

"What are you doing in my house?" Kenji says evenly, though his

heart rate is picking up fast.

“Well, you changed your number again and you moved. It took some doing, but I finally found this place. I must say, it’s nicer than I tho-”

“How did you even get up here?” Kenji asks, firmer this time.

“What do you mean? You *let* me up. I honestly thought you’d turn me away, but I was pleasantly surprised when the guard gave me the go ahead.”

Damn it. He shouldn't have hit ‘ok’ without checking with security, but he was so sure it was Ben, he didn’t think about it twice. The approved visitors list exists for a reason. This can’t become a habit- it’s his dad this time, but what if in his haste he let in a stalker? Or a thief?

Though, if we’re talking thieves, the man in front of him certainly fits the bill.

“I was expecting someone else.” He explains lamely.

“Oh?” His dad hums, his curiosity obviously piqued. “Ah, right. Who is this ‘babe?’ Did you and Brooklynn-”

“Nope. Doesn’t matter. What do you want?”

“I want to visit my son.” The man holds up the bag he’s carrying, and Kenji can now confirm that it indeed holds fruit- oranges, to be exact.

“Thanks, but I really don’t want you in my house.”

“What? Why?” He takes a step forward and stops. He looks down then grimaces at Kenji. “Because of how dirty it is?”

Kenji looks down at his feet and sees the discarded clothes from earlier. He does this all the time since he knows he’ll pick it up later, but only now does it bother him. Not because it’s embarrassing, but because his Dad, who he didn’t intend to let up here, is choosing to point it out.

“I just came back-”

“I’m used to your messes. You’ve never been good about picking up after yourself.” Kenji wants to roll his eyes and tell him off, but he’s losing control of the conversation. He calms himself down so he can deal with this.

“Look, Daniel. I just don’t want-”

“Again with that?!” The man’s voice raises, his tone no longer friendly. The last time Kenji spoke with him was months ago, and he called him by his first name back then as well. He has no intention to ever call him ‘dad’ ever again- something that clearly upsets the man.

Unexpectedly, his dad shuts his eyes and calms himself- A habit they both seemed to have developed. A small, optimistic part of Kenji hopes it means he’s been improving himself over the years, but a cynical part of him, one who’s been disappointed over and over again, just wants him out of here quickly.

When Daniel opens his eyes again, he's as serene as he was when he stepped off the elevator.

"Let's not fight, *son."* He emphasizes the word, probably to irritate him. "After all, I didn't come just to visit."

"Really?" Kenji says dubiously.

"It's December, Kenji. Your mother's memorial wasn't that long ago."

Suddenly, Kenji feels a weight settle into his stomach. He hadn't *forgotten* about it- how could he? It's just that he didn't go to the columbarium like he wanted to, nor did he set up a memorial table. His packed schedule kept him away, and it's not going to improve for a while. Today happened to be one of the few days off he has this month.

On the actual day of her death anniversary, he simply poured a shot of sake for them both, put on her favorite record, and pored over old photo albums, wishing she were still around. He did a similar ritual before.

The bag of oranges his dad brought with him makes sense now. Kenji wouldn't be surprised if he also brought incense as well, probably hoping to offer his mom a prayer then spend the evening together. They haven't done this in years- even from before Kenji moved out after his 18th birthday.

He's tempted to give in- it's for his mom after all. For all his faults, his dad really loved her. Maybe he should put aside his feelings for just one night.

But then, he's reminded of all the crap the man has put him through- and all the crap he continues to put Kenji through, and he gives up on the notion of having a nice evening with him.

“I have my own ritual and I did it already. You can do yours in your own home.” Kenji takes a step forward, and his dad flinches and takes one backwards. “You need to leave.”

"堅志, お前-"

"I told you not to speak to me in Japanese."

"Why, are you *ashamed* of our culture?" Kenji rolls his eyes at that.

"No, because I never learned it. Not properly. There was never anyone at home for me to practice with." Daniel doesn't falter, apparently not at all ashamed that Kenji basically called him an absentee father.

“Kenji, please. Can't we just light incense together? Eat some fruit? I wouldn't be here long.” The man says with slight exasperation, like he can't believe Kenji is being 'unreasonable.' This isn't new behavior, and just like Kenji thought, he's still exactly the same.

“No.” He says sternly, taking another step towards him.

His dad's face contorts into one he's never seen before- desperation. A small voice in his mind tells him he should feel bad that he's driving the man away, but he quashes it. Why would he be making this face? Either he just really wanted to spend the evening with him… or he's

got an ulterior motive.

“Please, son, I just– Can’t we just–”

“You want something again, don’t you?” Kenji guesses. “You’re just using mom’s memorial as an excuse to see me.”

“It’s not much! I just need another fifteen thousand-”

“I gave you ten earlier this year! And ten the year before that! Honestly, I don’t know why I even bother!” He’s no longer trying to hold it together, his voice raising with each word.

“I know, I know! But I’m on the verge of something great! Me and my partner are-”

“Partner?” Kenji scoffs. “I’m surprised you can find anyone to work with you after Mantah Corp blacklisted you.”

“It’s nothing shady. Kash and I have been developing robotic-”

“I don’t care. And really? His name is Kash? C’mon.”

“So you can buy a luxurious place like this but you can’t help me out? I’m not asking for-”

“I know this place might give you the impression I have an endless supply of money,” Kenji interrupts. “But ten thousand, which I already

gave you, is a lot even for me."

His dad just stares at him, jaw slack. He then shuts it tight and shakes his head in disbelief.

"You are so ungrateful."

"Yeah, yeah, just get out." Kenji reaches around him for the elevator button, ready for this unpleasant conversation to be over.

"After everything I did to keep us going, you still treat me like this? After how hard I worked to keep a roof over your head? After how much I sacrificed?"

Kenji's hand stops. He doesn't meet the man's eyes, but he remains close to him and leans in so he can hear every word he's about to say clearly.

"You mean how hard **I** worked. Me. I was keeping us afloat, not you. In fact, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have struggled like I did after moving out."

"You think you had it bad?! I had nothing after you left! You took all the money and removed me from the trust account! I eventually had to sell our house and fire all the staff! I've been living in a small apartment!"

"I had to live with Darius! His family kindly took me in and I had to rely on them for over a year. There wasn't a lot of money left in that account, you know. Maybe I wasn't raking in as much as I do now, but I sure as hell was making more than you. Not that I'd know it after

looking at my balance back then."

"We had to-"

"Without Uncle Simon," Kenji interrupts. "I wouldn't even be working right now. He bailed me out after my association with you almost got me blacklisted."

"Stop your whining! You don't know the kind of pressure I was under. I had to make tough choices. Take some risks. Mantah Corp was expecting a lot out of me, and I had to juggle my work and being a single parent."

"And look how both those things turned out. Besides, is never being home what you call parenting? Or terrorizing people on set? The manipulation and extortion? Making your toadies watch me instead of being there for me yourself?"

"I did all that to help you, you ungrateful brat!"

"Was it helping me when you *beat* me?!" Kenji screams. "When you'd *belittle* me?! Or *ignored* me for months?!"

His dad's nose flares and he matches Kenji's glare. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see his dad's hand twitch. He probably wants to strike him, even now. How dare Kenji bring all this up and be unappreciative of his efforts? Please.

"I'm not that scared kid anymore. If you lay a hand on me, you'll regret it." He says darkly. He straightens his posture, now certainly taller than the man who he used to look up to- both figuratively and

literally.

A look of hesitation sits in his dad's eyes, and Kenji is sure this is over.

But in an instant, that look of uncertainty and fear is replaced by a cruel sneer.

"You are a child. You waste your money on a shiny new penthouse, a new car. I heard you got that Coupe you begged me for when you turned sixteen. Look, you still leave your clothes everywhere." For good measure, he kicks at Kenji's abandoned winter coat.

"Leave." Kenji says dangerously.

"Face it- you left when you turned eighteen, but you're still the same boy you were when we lived together. You're immature and ungrateful."

"Now!" Kenji shouts. His dad doesn't even flinch this time.

"I bet you still think you like boys." The older man taunts. "I heard that Simon has got you starring in some queer movie with… Ben, was it? I thought you were finally rid of him, but that disgusting freak is still holding you bac-"

Before he knows he's doing it, he has the man by the collar against the wall. The move shocks the smug look off his face, but he doesn't fight back. In fact, he puts his hands up.

“A nerve I see. Don’t tell me you still think you’re in love with him?”

“Shut up!” He grits out, pushing him further into the wall.

“You do.” His dad sings knowingly. “You had quite a few tabloids speculating about you two. Well, I wonder what *he* would think if he saw you now.”

“I swear, you-”

“You think you’re better off on your own now, but inside, you’re still the same scared little boy. Without me, you’d be a nobody. Without me, you wouldn’t even have the money you cling to so selfishly. You owe me, Kenji.”

Kenji has had enough.

He raises his dad higher, using all his strength to lift him. This startles the man, his hands now finding Kenji’s in an attempt to free himself, though to no avail. Kenji may have been a beanpole growing up, but taking up climbing and doing a bunch of action films has done wonders for his strength and physique. He’s just never had to use it in this way before.

The look in his dad's eyes shifts into one of fear, and for some reason, the sight only incenses him further.

“Son, please-”

“Kenji! Stop!”

All of a sudden, a weight is on his arm, pulling it down. A familiar and freakish strength gets him to let go, and his dad falls from his grasp with a thud. His immediate instinct is to turn his anger on this new person who dared to stop him.

But when his eyes meet the blue ones he’s been waiting for this whole time, all of that anger just evaporates.

“B-babe? You’re here?”

“I told you I’d come afterwards. Didn't know you’d have company.” Ben smiles at him. Confusion and concern are plain in his expression, but Ben still smiles at him comfortingly.

As they’re talking, his dad scrambles to the elevator. Before either of them can react, he’s gone.

Ben turns his attention back to him and holds his hands.

“I won’t be long, but I’m gonna go downstairs and talk to the guards. Tell them he’s no longer allowed in the building. And, maybe make sure he’s not skulking around down there.”

“Ben-”

“Five minutes, tops. I promise.”

Kenji's head is spinning. He was running high on adrenaline not a minute earlier, and now he's back on earth, being talked calmly to by his boyfriend. He'd like nothing more than to let himself be soothed back to reality, but the idea that his dad is still around won't let him. So, he gives in.

"Okay."

"Okay." Ben repeats.

The elevator dings again, and just as quickly as he got here, Ben is gone. Kenji just stands there, waiting by the doors.

In his head, he counts down the seconds. Five minutes. Two minutes. Thirty seconds.

One second past five minutes, he reaches for the elevator button. He's stopped when the alert goes off. Not the comm checking in with him, but the alert- meaning whoever is downstairs is coming up without his say-so.

When the doors open this time, he's greeted by the one he was expecting earlier- Ben.

Neither of them say a word. Ben just walks up to him and wraps his arms around his shoulders, Kenji returning the gesture. He nuzzles his face in the other's neck, the soft brown hair that's grown too long tickling his face. He sighs as he takes in the scent of his man.

He expects Ben to ask questions. He expects him to explain what went on downstairs. He even expects Ben to no longer want to spend the night, perhaps a little scared of Kenji after seeing such a side to him.

None of those things happen. Instead, Ben leads him to the couch, somehow fitting both of them on it as they settle in, and puts on a random movie- the sound of which becomes white noise until they both are lulled to sleep.

--

Kenji is awoken by a loud crash from his kitchen, followed by a few choice expletives in a screechy voice. Blinking through the haze, he finds he's covered by the throw blanket he keeps on the couch, the thing barely providing enough warmth.

A bit disoriented, he looks around his barely lit living room and sees it in the same state he found it in- outerwear on the floor, tv still on, and a Ben sized indentation on the couch next to him. The sun has barely risen from the looks of it, and the digital clock confirms that it's not even seven yet.

Taking the throw blanket with him, he meanders into the kitchen, picking up his clothes on the way, where he finds Ben fretting over a couple of his pans on the ground.

"Uh, you doing okay?" Kenji asks groggily.

"These are heavier than they look. I dropped one on my toes." Ben grumbles. "Now it has a dent."

“Oh. No, that one was always dented. It’s my good-luck pan.” The other gives him a strange look before returning his attention to the pans.

“I should have just grabbed drive-thru or something. I wanted to make breakfast before you woke up, but, well…”

“Well, now that I’m up, we can both make breakfast.”

After a few more grumbles from Ben, who insists he can handle it, the two eventually emerge from the kitchen and return to Kenji’s couch, a plate of ham and cheese omelets in hand.

They put the movie that was playing last night back on, but Kenji still can’t find it in him to pay attention. On the contrary, it’s hard for him to focus on anything other than Ben.

Just like last night, he’s firmly snuggled up to Kenji. The added warmth the other provides is welcome on this chilly winter morning, but being this close means he can feel every little movement the other makes as they eat. Combined with the knowledge that Ben wanted to surprise him with food and was bummed when he accidentally woke him up, this situation is doing a number on Kenji’s heart.

It’s all so comfortable and domestic- a kind of feeling Kenji hasn’t felt in a while. He and Brooklynn lived together for a little over a year, but they never did anything like this. At most, they’d just chat in the kitchen over some coffee before going on with their day.

If he could, Kenji would stay like this all day.

They can't, however, since they're both expected on set by noon.

The entire drive there, Ben only talked about how to approach the Brooklynn and Darius situation. To which, of course, Kenji was interested. The consensus is that Kenji should apologize but only if she approaches him. He shouldn't push it, especially since it happened only yesterday.

However, at some point, he was expecting Ben to bring up the whole thing with his dad. He never did.

At first he was glad for it- Ben isn't the type to pry and is willing to let Kenji tell him in his own time. At least, that's what he hopes he's doing. It didn't take long before his anticipation turned into anxiety, and he feared it wouldn't go away until Ben finally confronted him. As he was getting his makeup done, the artist kept chastising him for fidgeting so much.

Kenji really wants to get it over with and explain himself- explain how he got to the point where he was about to throttle his dad. Though, as he's never been that upset or angry before, he's not sure he would be able to at all.

He's able to snap out of it when he gets to set and Brooklynn is there, already in her wig and makeup. Instead of last night, he's reminded of their day at the Hidden Adventure, and he feels anxious for an entirely different reason. The conversation he and Ben had in the car comes to mind, and he takes the sage advice on 'not bringing it up and letting her come to you when she's ready.'

All she offers him is a brief 'hey.' Other than that, they don't talk outside of their lines. The scene itself doesn't exactly help- Louis and Charlotte are having an intimate conversation, where the pair are barely two feet apart at all times. It even ends in a chaste kiss.

Of course, being professionals, they're able to sell the emotions. As soon as the first AD tells them they're done an hour or so later, Brooklynn is out of there without so much as a goodbye.

He attempts to follow after her, but is stopped in his tracks by none other than Simon Masrani. The man is slightly dressed down today- only in a shirt with slacks. Of course, both of them probably cost as much as Kenji's car. Despite being interrupted, he welcomes seeing the man.

"Kenji! It's so good to see you, my boy."

"It's great to see you too!" The pair laugh as they embrace. "You don't usually show up to filming."

"Well, I had a free moment, so I thought I'd come down here and see what I'm paying for." He jokes. "No, but really, I was hoping to catch miss Dearing. Have you seen her?"

"Oh, Claire. Um, not recently, but she's definitely around. She's been doing rewrites."

"Ah, always proactive. That's good to hear." Simon glances at his watch. "We really must catch up properly one of these days, my boy."

"For sure. I'll let my assistant know, maybe we can do lunch?"

"Sounds perfect." He pats Kenji on the shoulder before continuing to look for Claire.

Well, as pleasant as that was, he most definitely lost his chance to talk to Brooklynn today. He'd rather not just hangout in his own trailer alone, so instead, he heads to Ben's. The other didn't have anything in the morning as far as he knew.

Luckily for him, the taller man is chilling on his couch, going over his daily sides. Without even greeting him or looking up, Ben scooches over to make room for Kenji, to which he gratefully takes advantage of.

For a while, they don't speak. Kenji isn't even sure what to say. He instinctively reaches for his phone to at least keep himself busy, but he realizes he left it in his own trailer. So, he just ends up sitting there in silence while Ben thoughtfully goes over his new lines.

Does he even have anything to report? He and Brooklynn were very professional, they filmed their scenes, and then she practically ran away. If not for a chance encounter with his godfather, he might have caught her, but that's not how things worked out.

And then he remembers what he was panicking about before he started filming. Crap, now that he has Ben alone, is he finally gonna get it over with and talk about last night? Or maybe he should ignore it until Ben asks? God, he doesn't know what to do.

After another few moments of spiraling in silence, the taller man takes the initiative and speaks first.

"I can hear you overthinking."

"What? I wasn't- Well, I mean- Ugh… Was it that obvious?"

“Judging from the fact you didn’t burst in here telling me things are okay again between you and Brooklynn, I’m guessing no headway was made?”

“No.” Kenji sighs. “I guess it was foolish to think we’d be okay so soon, huh?”

“Just a little.” Ben teases. “You guys were besties for years. I don’t think this is going to last forever.”

“Yeah. Me neither.”

“While I’m glad that you don’t seem to be too hung up about it, why do you still sound… concerned?” Ben asks, finally tearing his eyes away from his sides and looks at him properly.

Okay... No cold feet now, Kenji.

“I uh, wanted to explain. About last night.” When Ben doesn’t respond to that, Kenji gulps and continues. “My dad just kind of showed up and we said some things-”

“Some things?”

“I don’t think I want to repeat what he said. Anyway, um, it really made me upset, and I wasn’t thinking and just… I don’t know. Lost control? I didn’t even realize how far I’d taken it until you came in.”

“You’re dad is a pretty upsetting guy to be around.” Ben tacks on.

“Yeah… Heh. Well, I just wanted to clear the air about it.”

“Why?”

“‘Why?’ I mean, you don’t think anything of how… mad I got?” Kenji asks cautiously, picking his words as carefully as possible.

“It was surprising to see, I’ll admit. It wasn’t the normal thing I catch you doing when I show up unannounced.”

“That happened one time!” Kenji blushes, not expecting Ben to bring up ‘the incident.’ No, he will not be explaining. His boyfriend laughs at his reaction, and despite how frazzled he is, Kenji can’t help but laugh a little as well.

A moment of silence passes again, and now between the two of them, it seems like Ben has something he wants to say, which he does after he finds the courage.

“We can be honest with each other, right? I… I want to talk to you about something, but I don’t want you thinking I’m trying to upset you or anything.”

Oh. Kenji isn’t sure this is going to be pleasant, especially with that kind of preface. Still, if nothing else, he’s interested in what the other wants to say.

“Anything, babe. There’s… something I want to talk about as well.”

“Okay. Um, I’ll go first before I chicken out.” Ben takes a deep breath, and exhales slowly. Kenji unconsciously does the same. “If I’m being honest, this wasn’t the first time I saw you like that.”

“Oh. Really?” Kenji wracks his brain, trying to think of what other time Ben would have seen him in such a state. He’s not sure he ever got that mad before. At the very least, not to the point where he held someone by their- Wait.

Their breakup.

Shit.

“You’re talking about the green room after season three, right?” Kenji guesses, and Ben’s grimace in response all but confirms it.

“Yup. It’s not a day I like to think about, but, well. That was the first time I saw you so angry you lashed out physically.”

“Babe, I’m so-”

“I’m not looking for apologies. I already forgave you, remember?” Ben offers a tiny smile. “The point I’m trying to get at is, it wasn’t the first time I’ve seen you like that.”

There’s a connection being drawn for him- at least Kenji thinks there is- and he doesn’t like what it implies. He tries his best to keep a level

head, since Ben explicitly said he's not trying to upset him, but he can't help how sweaty he's starting to feel. He can already feel his grip tightening on the leather sofa.

"I wasn't myself, Seanny. I'm… I'm not-"

"Hey, look at me." Ben says firmly. "I'm not implying you're violent or anything. On the contrary, those were two very stressful situations. Otherwise, you're pretty laid back." Ben assures him, even scooching himself closer. "But, considering what you had to go through with your father, I'm only asking for you to consider there might be… problems that you might not be aware you have."

"Problems?" Kenji gulps. "Like what?"

"Like, mentally? There are times when you look so tired, and not in a 'overworked' kind of way either. And sometimes, you get way too into your head and it's hard for you to ground yourself."

"Isn't everyone like that?? I- I don't know." Kenji exclaims, feeling trapped all of a sudden. "I guess?? I'm not a pharmacist or whatever so-"

"Psychologist." Ben corrects.

"I'm not insane, Ben."

"I didn't say-"

“Just because I overthink things doesn’t mean I have a problem. Just because I get a little sad sometimes doesn’t mean there’s something deeper.” His voice starts rising, little by little, with each word. He keeps rambling and he can’t seem to stop.

“Kenji, I didn’t-”

“Just because I was pissed at my dad doesn’t mean I’m some kind of monster that can’t control his anger.”

“That’s not what I said!” Ben raises his own voice, though his expression remains one of concern. As it is, it does nothing to calm Kenji down.

“Look, I’m sorry last night reminded you of that day. I’m sorry I sometimes think too much. But… I don’t need a psycho.”

“Psychologist.” Ben repeats.

“Whatever! I’m not some looney that needs help.”

Suddenly, Ben’s expression shifts, and the look of concern twists something downright antagonistic. However, just as suddenly, Ben shuts his eyes, breathes deeply again, and focuses on Kenji calmly- with a frown, he must point out.

“I’m seeing a psychologist.”

This catches Kenji’s attention, and whatever unease there was inside

him has turned into confusion.

“What?”

“‘I’m not a disgusting freak like you.’ The day we broke up, that was the last thing you said to me before you left.”

“Ben, I-”

“You need to be quiet and let me finish.” Ben commands, and of course, Kenji obeys.

Another deep breath, and another few seconds of just maintaining eye contact.

“I’m *not* blaming you, but those words affected me badly. The disgusting part, especially. I never felt clean. I always felt dirty, and that everything I did was dirty. I started to carry around sanitizer, and if I ever ran out, I’d scratch at my arms, sometimes until they were red and sore.”

With every word, Kenji’s stomach drops further and further. The day they talked over their shared past, Ben never mentioned any of this. Sure, he said something about not being well after their breakup, but he couldn’t have imagined any of this.

“My mom had started to notice, but I told her it was something basic like not wanting to get sick so I can go to Brazil. And even there, I never went anywhere without copious amounts of sanitizer. But I had found with time, it went away. That is, until I’d see you or Brooklynn. On TV, in a magazine- it didn’t matter. I’d have… moments where I

couldn't control it. When I got back to the states, I finally admitted to myself I had a problem and needed help."

Ben said 'I'm not blaming you' and Kenji is trying to believe it, but as the other keeps speaking, he can't help but feel guilty anyway.

"I found Doctor Harding, and she's been helping me ever since then. She told me limiting my exposure to you might help, so I did. I never created any social media accounts. I never went to events where you were invited. It helped. It got to the point where I didn't need sanitizer anymore. The worst reaction I'd have is a little itch. Then, being around you more, getting closer again, I didn't get reactions at all."

"Ben," Kenji starts, hoping the other is okay with him finally speaking. "I don't care if you shush me again, but I'm so fucking sorry. I'm so, so sorry you went through that. Why didn't you tell me this when we were talking that one day?"

"Because I didn't want you to think it was your fault. It's not my fault either, according to Dr. Harding. My brain decided to cope with my unpleasant emotions and changing environment in that way. But I never would have known that, or gotten better, if I didn't seek out the help I needed."

"I- I see your point." Kenji rubs his eyes, feeling them sting with tears. He never knew how adversely he affected Ben. He knew he was upset, sure, but… all of that? He can't begin to imagine. Though, from what Ben is implying, he might be in the same boat mentally.

"Kenji-"

"I think you're right. I, uh, I don't know if I'm ready to look for a

shrink just yet-”

“Psychologist. Or a therapist, whichever you need.”

This time, Kenji actually laughs.

“Yeah. One of those. I don’t know if I’m ready just yet, but I think you’re right. Maybe… maybe I need to talk to someone about what happened to me. With my dad. With… with you before.”

“Hey, admitting to yourself you need help is already a big step.” Ben says gently. “And, you can always lean on me. This kind of thing isn’t something you can go through alone.”

“Were you alone?”

“I had Bumpy. She… she was the only one I confided in about our relationship. I guess that means I outed you to her. Sorry.”

“Babe, on the cosmic scale of things, I’m the one who needs to apologize for like, ever.”

“No, you don’t.” Ben assures him. “But if you ever feel guilty about anything, I know something you can do.”

“Hmm?”

“This.”

The gap between them closes, and Ben's soft lips are being pushed against his. Kenji sighs into the kiss, parting his lips a little and deepening their kiss. All too soon, Ben is pulling away, smirking. Though, with noticeably flushed cheeks, Kenji notes.

"Sounds good?"

"Can I do that even if I'm not feeling guilty?"

Ben just smiles and scoots away from him, mischief in his eyes. Kenji follows, and once again, their lips find one another.

It's some time before one of the crew comes knocking, and by then, Kenji is sure the makeup department is going to give him a tongue lashing.

--

A few days have passed and Kenji, finally, has another day off. Other than a video meeting with some fashion week organizers, he has nothing else scheduled. Sadly, none of the others have the day off, either filming scenes for 'In the Stars' or busy with other projects or meetings. Ben promised he'd visit in the evening, but the guy is spending the day recording lines for one of the animated shows he's in.

Basically, Kenji is bored and alone. He'd like to finally visit his mom at the columbarium, but he'd hate to run into his dad there. He hopes she understands and forgives him.

Instead, he decides to visit Griffith Observatory.

He used to go there often with his parents when he was little. There, Kenji found a love for the stars and space. He might not have been the best at things like math or history, but if you asked him about the solar system and the life cycle of a star? Right answer, every time.

His mom loved his enthusiasm and took him as often as he wanted. His father, however, wanted him to focus more on his budding acting career. Honestly, if he wasn't an actor, Kenji would have probably pursued Astronomy or something.

After his mom passed, his dad never took him back. Heck, he didn't go back on his own until after he moved out.

Kenji buys a ticket for the Planetarium show, grateful that the place is relatively empty right now. Sometimes school kids take field trips to the Observatory, but today, it's just a couple of old folks and loners like him.

He takes his seat, finding he has a whole row to himself, and relaxes as the lights dim and the show begins.

A minute or so in, he realizes he's heard this particular program before. He allows himself to zone out, watching as the different constellations and celestial bodies move across the domed ceiling. It may not be as beautiful as the real night sky, but it brings him comfort nonetheless.

Memories of the first time he came here after his mom died take over, until that's all he can think about.

-years ago-

Kenji is grateful his beat up second-hand car made it up the hill to the observatory, albeit barely. Brand, Darius' older brother, was generous and let Kenji have his old car when he bought himself a new one. It's only now he realizes why the older boy was so willing to part with it.

It's no Coupe, but it serves him.

He spends the extra few dollars for the closer parking, not liking the idea of leaving his car on the steep roadside. Donning his disguise for the day- a simple baseball cap and hoodie- he heads inside.

The place has changed a bit from the last time he was here- several exhibits and shows are more modernized now. But, overall, it's just like how he remembers it.

Though, he wishes he could have visited with his mom, just one last time.

Walking around, taking in all the exhibits and demonstrations, he's happy with how quickly the information he knew by heart long ago comes back. There's a 3D model of Jupiter hanging in one of the wings, and he takes his time staring at it in awe, watching as her swirling storms move overhead.

He spends the whole day taking his time to enjoy everything. He even buys a ticket for the last Planetarium show of the day- The Summer

Triangle.

Taking his seat, he finds he's the only person there alone. Everyone else are either parents with their kids or couples on dates. He guesses the latter are here since it's dark and atmospheric- the perfect place to make out.

Honestly, Kenji contemplated bringing Brooklynn here. Not to make out, just to clarify. She's never shown interest in astronomy before, but she's so knowledgeable about so many other things, he wonders if she might be into it.

The reason he decided *not* to, however, is probably childish of him. Now that he's finally taken the plunge and visited on his own, he wouldn't mind coming more often. Since this place holds a special place in his memory, he'd like it to be *his* spot- somewhere he can go to be alone. He loves Darius and his family, and he loves his 'girlfriend' Brooklynn, but sometimes, Kenji needs space to unwind by himself. And where better than somewhere all about 'space'?

Yes, he's corny.

The music starts, followed by the voice over, and in a few minutes, Kenji realizes why this show in particular is popular. The Summer Triangle, as it turns out, focuses on the Lovers- Altair and Vega. The voiceover explains the mythological story behind the different constellations, and Kenji has to stifle his laughter. It's all very interesting, but to make a whole program about literal star-crossed lovers?

The other patrons, however, love it. Or, in the case of the couples, appreciate the atmosphere the program provides.

It makes Kenji think- maybe he wouldn't come here with Brooklynn or Darius… but if he and Ben were still together, would he have taken him here?

He looks at the empty seat next to him.

Before he can get in his head, he slaps both cheeks, ridding himself of such thoughts. The sound startles the family next to him on the other side, but he ignores their curious gazes. Focusing on the voiceover, Kenji tries to distract himself with the information, ridiculous as it is to him. Better that than let himself spiral down that blue-eyed rabbit hole again- something that never bodes well for him.

Next time, he better look up what program is going to play, hoping to avoid this particular one again.

-present-

Kenji kept his promise to himself, not bringing anyone else here and making this place his personal hideaway. He normally also keeps his promise about checking ahead of time what program would be playing. Except today, which as it happens, is the The Summer Triangle.

Written in the stars, he thinks. He laughs at the notion.

The show continues, and he can tell it's been updated since the first time he heard it. The graphics aren't all that much better, but accompanying the voice over is music and sound effects, making the experience feel even grander.

Suddenly, he can feel someone sitting down to his right. His first reaction is to be annoyed- there's so many empty seats, why sit next to him? His next instinct is to panic- if this is some paps or a fan who recognized him, this place may no longer be safe for him to visit so casually anymore. Instinctively, he turns a little to hide his face.

"Excuse me, aren't you Kenji Kon?" The person whispers.

Ah, crap.

"Who?"

"I'm right, aren't I? You're that handsome actor." The person says almost right against his ear. Kenji is freaking out so much. The voice is kind of high and he can't tell if it's a dude or a chick. Not that it matters, because whoever it is, he needs to book it.

"I think you got me confused for someone else."

"I heard a rumor that you're dating your co-star, Ben Pincus."

What the hell??

Kenji turns to deny the claim, but as he finally looks at the other, his

jaw goes slack in surprise. Even in the dim light, and with his half-baked disguise, the person sitting next to him is unmistakably Ben.

“Babe??” He says, a little loudly. The elderly couple sitting nearby shush him.

“Sorry, couldn’t resist.”

“I thought you were busy? How’d you know-”

“What, that you’d be here? I didn’t, but Darius told me you probably would be. And I finished my recording sesh already.”

“Darius? I never told him about this place.”

“He said something about you sneaking out sometimes when you lived together, and that one day you accidentally left the pamphlet for this place out. Guess he put two and two together.”

“Oh.” Kenji replies dumbly.

“Of course, I had to look around for you, but the moment I stepped in here, I knew it was you.”

“Because of my height.” He guesses.

“That, and, you were the only person in here alone.” Ben teases. Kenji rolls his eyes playfully, but returns the smile nonetheless.

They don't speak for the rest of the presentation- just enjoying themselves and looking up at the colored ceiling in amused silence. When it's over, they wait until everyone else leaves before heading out. Ben walks close to him and, surprisingly, links their hands together, the pair walking hand in hand. Kenji instinctively looks around to see if anyone notices. Content, he allows himself to enjoy the rare public display of affection.

"Hey, Kenji?"

"Hmm?"

"Sorry if I intruded today."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It took some arm twisting to get Darius to tell me about this place. He said this was probably where you come to get away from everything. I was gonna just go home and call you later, but… I don't know. I guess I just wanted to see you. Sorry."

"You don't gotta apologize for that." Kenji assures him. "He's right, I come here when I want to destress. This is where me and my mom used to come a lot."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, but I could never find the time to come more often. Since you were busy, I figured I'd visit. Heh, you're the first person I'm spending

time with here."

"Really? You never took Brooklynn?"

"Nah. I'm sure we would have had fun, but yeah, this was kind of something I kept to myself."

"Oh." Ben says again.

"Don't worry, babe. I think for you, I can make an exception."

Ben doesn't say anything to that, but he does smile to himself. And Kenji means it, by the way. If Brooklynn had found this place when they were 'dating' he might have been a little ticked off. Darius, he might have been fine with, but it sounds like the other already knew and kept it a secret. Bless him. He's been thinking about this lately, but there's so many things he wants to share with Ben that he never got the chance to. This, he figures, can be one of them.

By the time they reach the parking lot, the sun has set and the place is starting to close for the day.

"How'd you get here? Do you need a ride home?"

"Bumpy was at a meeting near the studio I was recording at, so she gave me a ride here. And, uh, I was kind of hoping I could come over tonight?"

Kenji doesn't voice it, but he finds it both hilarious and endearing

that- after everything they've been through- that the other man still asks if he can stay the night. He smirks up at him before answering.

"I thought you'd never ask, babe."

--

Kenji is awoken by the irritating buzzing of his cellphone, the thing left on his nightstand. He blinks awake and sees Ben still slumbering next to him, the taller man tuckered out after the fun they had after getting to his penthouse. The room is still dark, so it must still be late.

He grabs the offending object and squints to read the bright screen, seeing that his manager Kelly is the one calling. Why is she ringing him in the dead of night? She shouldn't be working right now, and neither should he. Though, she wouldn't call if it wasn't important…

Deciding he'll just deal with it in the morning, he dismisses the call, puts the thing faced down, and hopes the woman takes the hint.

Once again, a buzzing echoes again in the room, this time from the other nightstand. Ben groans, now awake. Groping for it without looking, Ben brings the thing to his face and ever so slightly frowns when he sees who's calling.

"Is it Mae?" he asks. Ben just grunts in affirmation. "Huh. I just got a call from Kelly."

This seems to startle Ben awake. He sits up in bed, looking between Kenji and his phone pensively.

“What? Babe?”

“The last time she called this late…”

Oh. Right. The last time this happened, someone caught them making out behind the trailers. The blowout from that was a mess, especially with how the media treated Ben. It took almost a month of damage control before they seemed to move on.

That can’t be the case now, though, can it? The only time someone would have seen them was when they exited the planetarium together, and even then, they didn’t kiss or anything. They held hands, sure, but surely someone catching them doing that wouldn’t be enough to warrant a 3 a.m. call.

“Maybe you should just answer it. It might be nothing.” He suggests. Ben tenses at the advice, his hand hesitating to pick up, but in the end he does, putting the phone to his ear.

“Yeah?”

He can’t hear what Mae is saying, and Ben isn’t saying anything back. But the expression on Ben’s face morphs so quickly, so violently, Kenji almost backs away in surprise. The shorter man went from confused, to startled, to deadset- all in the span of a few seconds.

Before he can ask what’s going on, his own phone buzzes again. It’s Kelly again.

“Ben, what-”

Suddenly, Ben is out of bed, racing outside. He doesn’t bother getting dressed, walking out of there without so much as a pair of shorts. At least Kenji knows he isn’t leaving the penthouse. Even more confused, he decides the only way he’s gonna get an answer is if he answers Kelly’s call.

The second he presses the button, he can hear talking loudly. Quickly, he puts the receiver to his ear.

“Hey Kels. Sorry, I was-”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Huh? Oh. No, I-”

“Just put the news on. Any. It should be everywhere by now.”

“What? What are you-”

“You have to see yourself.” She tells him cryptically. “And Kenji…”

“Yeah?”

“I’m so sorry.”

Before he can ask, she hangs up. He immediately pulls her contact back up, with every intention of getting a clear answer out of her. She calls him incessantly and then doesn't even tell him why? Just watch the news or whatever?

Sounds from the living room give him pause. Ben must have turned the TV on. The voice of a reporter echoes, though Kenji can't tell what she's saying. Did Mae ask Ben to watch the news as well?

Curious, he makes his way to the living room, remembering to at least slip on a pair of shorts before heading out there.

There are no lights on, except for the warm glow coming from the TV. Like he thought, Ben has the news playing, the other man watching from the couch. His arms are crossed and a deep frown lies on his face. The only thing keeping his modesty is the throw blanket haphazardly draped over his lower half. Even with Kenji making his entrance, Ben doesn't tear his eyes away from the screen.

'And reports are confirming that there are no survivors of the crash. Both passengers apparently died upon impact, the remains of the helicopter now a blaze. Rescue workers at the scene say that-'

Kenji finally looks up at the TV and almost doubles over in shock.

Juxtaposed against a flaming ruin against the hillside is a picture of a dear friend. The headline, in bold, reads-

<Deadly Helicopter Crash- Famed Hollywood Producer Simon Masrani Confirmed One Of Two Victims>

That... that can't be real. This can't be happening... He just saw him the other day. The pair had a lunch date planned. It was for this coming Sunday.

A gnawing ache forms in his chest, and the unpleasant feeling feels familiar. This kind of ache isn't one he thought he'd be feeling again so soon again. Simon, in many ways, took care of him. Most of his father's former friends and associates didn't give Kenji the time of day, except for Simon. Other than the Bowmans, Masrani was the closest thing to a family Kenji had left.

The image on the screen changes, as does the headline. He can hear the faintest gasp from Ben on the couch, though he doesn't turn to him. He can't tear his eyes from the screen.

<Confirmed: Second Victim Identified As Daniel Kon, Friend Of Simon Masrani>

He’s not sure what happens. He kind of just… switches off, his senses blurring together. Sound and light and form no longer have meaning, everything becoming one big sensory sensation. He’s not even sure if he’s breathing anymore.

It isn’t until lithe arms wrap around his shoulders, a familiar warmth at this point, does he tether himself back to reality. He finds himself on the ground, hunched over, his hands over his ears. The TV is turned off, the only light coming in from the open balcony window. In front of his face is Ben’s, the other looking at him with worry.

The white noise that was drowning everything out begins to fade and Ben's soft voice becomes clearer. The hands that were on his shoulder now pulling his own away from his ears, and the voice become even more clear.

"I'm here." Is all the other repeats.

It's so simple. But even so, the words ground him- becoming his anchor lest he drift away from himself again. And when he finally breaks, when the reality of what he saw on the news catches up and he understands what it means, Ben doesn't let him tear himself away. Even as he violently sobs, Ben continues to hold him, grounding him, and repeating those words over and over.

Even after he stops shaking and his eyes are dry, and the pain is replaced by a dull ache and hollow numbness, and the morning sun shines in through the window- Ben still holds him and still repeats those words over and over.

It's the last thing he hears before he finally allows himself to let go and finally drifts away, hoping that comfort finds him even in his dreams.

Chapter End Notes

The Only Exception by Jacob Whitesides (Orig. by Paramore)

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading!

I'm so sorry this took so dang long to update. Like I said in the last ending notes, this was mostly done a while ago, but life and family and work really got in my way. That, and if I'm honest, so did a bunch of video games lol BUT, I've finally finished it!

Some of you might have noticed that the chapter count went up from 15 to 17, and that's because I've thought of a new plot point that will take a couple of chapters to explore. I won't make any promises, but I'm in a better place to continue working on this (mostly) regularly, so look the next update by the end of the February!

Also: AAAAAA, CHAOS THEORY IS COMING! GET HYPE!

EDIT: I got half done! Gonna aim for March 14th for chapter 13!
EDIT: I'm prepping for a convention rn, so my freetime is almost nonexistent ;A; I made a little more progress, tho! Gonna aim for april 2nd! Sorry for the delay again!
EDIT: I was dead for a week after that convention ;A; tired but rewarding! Anyway, gonna focus on the next couple of chapters, plus the art that I've been putting off, so expect both by the end of the month! Thanks for your patience!
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Check out my Ben/Kenji AUs!

- JWCC Rewrite AU
- Regular Summer Camp! AU
- Fake Dating/College AU
- Friends to Lovers to Exes to Lovers/Actor AU (WIP)

--

Check out my socials and links!

Grow As We Go

Chapter Summary

Ben is unsure what to make of Kenji in the aftermath of his father's death.

Chapter Notes

cw// minor character deaths, therapy, discussion of mental health issues

Hello! Sorry this took so long (more on that in the end notes) but we're back! This one is pretty angsty, but I hope you enjoy!

Ben POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ben sits alone in a small waiting room of a small office in a tall, nondescript building. This place typically caters to people like him- people who require discretion. It isn't labeled in the building's directory, and the entrance door simply states the name of the person he's here to see- Dr. Sarah Harding.

"Mr Pincus? She's ready for you." He grunts as he stands, the secretary holding the door for him, and closes it softly behind him.

He never thought he'd ever see this office again. It hasn't changed a bit- which is both comforting and a little concerning. Organized chaos is what Doctor Harding calls it; everything in its right place, despite nothing seeming to be in any kind of system or order. Books are strewn everywhere, papers litter her desk, and photos of her travels are peppered on the otherwise plain walls. The first time Ben came to this office, he was at a loss for words. He'd have believed her if she said she'd been robbed. But when she shook his hand and smiled as if nothing was wrong, he learned to roll with it.

Now, for the first time in years, he's shaking her hand again before he takes an all too familiar seat across from her.

"You've certainly grown since I've last seen you."

"I get that a lot. My own mom didn't recognize me when I came back from Brazil half a foot taller and more filled out."

"I can imagine." She starts, her tone casual. "So, I was surprised to hear you wanted another session after so long."

"I… I know. I've been alright, for the most part, so I didn't feel the need to. Though, I still get calls from your assistant regularly."

"Well, I'm glad you're still talking to someone. Still, I think it would have been nice to see you in person more often."

"Ah, sorry." He says a little sheepishly.

"No need to apologize. I just miss our talks, that's all." She smiles. "So, I hear you're currently filming another movie right now?"

"Oh, yeah. Got the lead, too. It's a romance, and they convinced the whole main cast from Camp Cretaceous to be a part of it. We're almost done shooting, but it's been fun so far."

"I bet." She pulls out her pen and opens her little journal. She begins to write something down, but continues to speak. "And when you say 'whole main cast,' does that include-"

“Kenji, yes.” He finishes for her. She furiously writes down more the second the other man’s name is uttered. It makes Ben a little uneasy.

“And, how is working with him?”

“Well. Uh, it’s been great. He’s the other lead.”

“Really? And, you mentioned this was a romance film, right?”

“Yes…?”

“I imagine, then, you two would be filming all sorts of scenes. More intimate ones, yes?”

“Y-yeah.” He’s not sure why, but this line of questioning makes him feel like he’s being interrogated. “It’s set in the 80s, so there’s a lot of costumes and props. I mean, it’s just things like boomboxes and jean jackets. Oh, let me tell you, last week I-”

Ben continues on like this, giving her in depth behind-the-scenes details that would probably get him in trouble with legal for breaching NDA. Still, he can’t seem to stop himself from blathering on, and Doctor Harding just lets him- all while nodding and writing down notes in that notebook of hers. When he finally exhausts himself of things to talk about, he just grimaces at her, and she returns the favor.

“Ben.”

Oh. Here we go.

“Yeah?”

“I’m so proud of you.”

“Huh?” he says, faster than his brain can process. “I- That’s not the response I expected.”

“Really? What response did you expect?”

“I dunno. I guess I thought you’d be telling me something like… joining this movie was a subconscious effort to relive my childhood since all my old friends are in it. Or, maybe point out that I barely talked about Kenji and read into that somehow. Something other than… that.”

“Wow. Maybe you should sit on this side of the table.” She laughs, in that effortlessly friendly way she does. Awkwardly, he returns it. “I truly mean what I said- I’m proud of you. Do you remember how you were when you first came to see me?”

“How can I forget?” He sighs ruefully, not liking the memories that resurface.

“You barely said ten words the whole hour!” She exclaims. “It was like pulling teeth trying to get you to talk to me. Now look at you- you just spent the last twenty minutes talking my ear off, offering details I would never have thought to ask you about.”

“Oh. Was it really that long?”

“I might be exaggerating a little, but the point stands. You’re more open to sharing now, more in tune with your feelings. Talking just seems much easier for you now. I mean, the fact that you scheduled an appointment after four years speaks volumes.”

“Huh.”

“And according to Nick, you haven’t had a serious episode in over a year. You’ve also stopped buying hand sanitizer, is that right?”

“Yeah. I haven’t touched the stuff in… almost as long.”

“Only minor relapses?” She guesses.

“One or two, but even then, not bad.”

“Good. You can’t expect perfection, not after how bad the tick was before. I also read that magazine article- congrats on coming out! I remember you telling me how badly you wanted to do that, last we spoke.”

“Thanks.” he says sheepishly.

“And look! You can even say you-know-who’s name, no problem!” Ben smiles at her use of his old nickname for Kenji.

“Kenji? Oh, yeah, me and him made up. It took a while, but we’re in a really good place right now.” In all the yapping Ben just did, he failed to mention that he and Kenji have gotten back together. He’s not sure if she keeps up with celebrity gossip, but he wouldn’t be surprised if she heard about the kissing incident.

“That’s good.” All of a sudden, Doctor Harding’s smile downturns, her gaze returning to her notebook. “I’m sorry to hear what happened to his father. He must be heartbroken.”

Ben’s mind immediately wanders to his lover. ‘Heartbroken’ isn’t exactly the word he’d use. He’s *sad,* sure. That first night was the most difficult. But after that he’s been… different? Definitely, but honestly it’s kind of hard to explain what’s going on with him. In any case, Ben asked Mae to rearrange his schedule so he and Kenji have the same time off as possible.

Filming for ‘In The Stars,’ along with every other Masrani-backed project, has been put on indefinite hiatus. While Ben is confident they’ll resume eventually, since the bulk of filming is very nearly finished, he fears the worst may come to pass. That said, that is only secondary to the fact two people are dead and their loved ones have to pick up the pieces of their lives.

And in Kenji’s case, both of them count as ‘loved ones.’

“Who wouldn't be?” Ben sighs. “Actually, that’s another reason I came back to see you.”

“Oh?”

“I wanted to ask if you have room in your schedule for another patient.”

“Kenji wants to see a psychiatrist?”

“Well, no, he hasn’t said, but I think he might want to, especially after going through what he is right now.” Doctor Harding’s frown becomes a grimace, which isn’t encouraging.

“Look, I understand you care about your lover, and I’m glad you trust me enough to recommend him to me, but keep in mind that this isn’t for everyone. The trauma is also very recent, and being forced to talk about it so soon may even be harmful.”

“I get that, I do. But right now he’s-” Suddenly, Ben realizes what she said. “Wait. I-I never said we got back together. How’d you know?”

“I didn’t. You just told me.” She says, more than a little smugly. “Honestly, even when you had your problems with him, your pupils would dilate when talking about him. They still do, after all these years. I could've excused it as lingering-attraction, especially considering your recent proximity, but now… you *smile* when you talk about him.”

“I-I do?”

“Yup. So, I took a stab in the dark. Thanks for telling me, even if it wasn’t on purpose.”

Ben’s head is spinning. One thing about Doctor Harding is that she’ll absolutely put her know-how to use and trick you into saying things you didn’t intend to. Take him coming out to her, for example. He didn’t mean to tell her he’s into guys, but their conversation about up and coming actors flowed naturally and she somehow surmised that

he had a small crush on one of them. He did, but he never outright said it, until she pretty much guessed and told him it's all chill. It's somewhat comforting to know she's still the same.

"Yeah, no problem."

"But I'm serious about not pushing him too hard to see a psychiatrist. Or a therapist. Just… see how he holds up for a little while longer, and let me know if there's any significant changes."

Honestly, Ben figured that would be her advice. She never rushed him to tell her things, so it stands to reason she'd advise the same for Kenji as well.

"Okay."

"Since we're talking about Kenji," She starts slowly. "You feel up to telling me how you got back together?"

Ben resettles in his chair, knowing full well this was coming. If he chooses not to share, she won't push. She knows how their previous relationship, and its subsequent end, affected him. Still, she already said she's proud of his progress regarding his ticks and ability to open up, so maybe this will be another case of him worrying over nothing.

So they talk. Or, rather, Ben talks. Doctor Harding barely says a word, mostly just nodding or smiling at things he says. To his confusion, she doesn't seem to write anything down as he regales her of his and Kenji's encounters over the last year. He's not sure if that's a good thing or not.

“And he told me *everything.* We were sitting there for hours, and the whole time, I held myself back from saying anything. It hurt, hearing about my hardships through his eyes, but… I never realized what he went through as well. I told him I forgave him for everything already, but I don’t think I actually let it all go until after he finished his story. Neither of us had an easy time back then.”

“That’s a mature attitude, Ben.” Doctor Harding finally says. “You’re a very strong person, you know that?”

“Huh?”

“You seem very surprised by what I have to say today.”

“A little, honestly.”

He’s never thought of himself as strong before- in any capacity. Heck, even though he’s a lot bigger now, with biceps twice the size they were when he last spoke to Doctor Harding, he wouldn’t even consider himself physically strong. Mentally, he’s struggled. She knows that better than anyone. But… he’s a ‘very strong person?’

“Ben, you got to this point in your life yourself.”

“With help. You, and Bumpy-”

“We’re just your support- offering you comfort and advice when you want it. Everyone should have a support system. But in the end, *you* put in the work, and *you* are able to stand on your own because of *you.* You know your limits, and you’ve pushed past them time and again.”

“I-I… I just-”

“You’re expecting me to scold you about getting back with Kenji, aren’t you?” Ben almost chokes on his spit. This woman knows him too well.

“Well-”

“I won’t lie, I have some reservations about you going back to him. Especially after how badly the breakup affected you. But like I said- you’re strong now. So strong- so intune to your own feelings, so understanding of others but not letting them walk all over you. I have little doubt that you’ll be fine.”

“Little doubt?” He questions hesitantly.

“Always have doubt, Ben.” She smiles. “It lets us protect ourselves, keeps us safe. Just never let doubt consume you, never let it win.”

Huh.

In the corner of his eyes, Ben feels tears threaten to spill. He went into this expecting the worst- Doctor Harding will be kind and patient, then she’ll grill him and tell him he’s making a huge mistake by getting back together with Kenji. That’s why he tried so hard to avoid talking about him, but immediately, the man became part of their conversation. Of course he did. Maybe it was paranoia, but he didn’t think it would have gone this well. All these things she’s told him, all this praise- it’s too much for Ben, and he can no longer hold back the dam of emotions he didn’t realize was threatening to break.

“Hey, it’s okay. You let it all out, Ben. Take all the time you need.” Doctor Harding says kindly. “Though, we only have about four minutes left for today, so maybe don't take too long.”

Despite himself, he laughs.

He really needed to see her, and he’s so glad he did. Without her, who knows where he’d be right now.

--

Normally Ben would never hop on the highway at this time of day, but he decided to take the long way back in hopes the puffiness in his eyes would be less noticeable by the time he gets there. He checks himself in the rearview mirror and sighs, knowing it’s a lost cause. Just as he’s pulling into the parking garage, he receives a text.

> *From: Nick (Dr Harding Assistant)*
>
> Reminder- check in call scheduled for tomorrow afternoon at 3PM PST.

Ben chuckles dryly. He forgot that was coming up. It’s funny to him that Nick didn’t get the memo about him going in for a regular appointment. He doubts something will happen between now and tomorrow afternoon, so he shoots the guy a quick text to cancel.

Kenji was asleep when Ben left for his appointment. He told the other he’d be gone by the time he woke up, though he said nothing of where he was going. It was weird- Kenji barely paid it any mind, where normally he’d at least ask Ben where he’s going. Maybe he had his

own plans for today. For all Ben knows, he's not even home.

The elevator dings as the door opens, and Ben is confronted with an entryway filled with cardboard boxes. It takes some maneuvering to get around them without tripping, but he manages to make it to the living area. Unfortunately, it's just as chaotically decorated, with stacks of books and items wrapped in newspaper littered throughout.

"Babe? Is that you?" Kenji's voice calls. From where, though, Ben isn't sure.

"Yeah, just got in." Ben replies. "Where are you?"

"I'm, uh…" Kenji seems to hesitate. "I'm kinda stuck."

"Stuck?"

"Yeah, under some boxes."

"What??" Ben looks around, not seeing any sign of the other man. "How-"

"Yeah, I know." Kenji sighs. "Can you help me out? I'm near the TV."

Ben quickly makes his way over, barely avoiding toppling over some of the towers of precariously stacked storage containers. In his haste, he almost steps right on Kenji, who is lying on the ground face down with a couple of boxes on top of him. From down below, the man smiles up at Ben.

“Hey, Benny.”

“What the hell happened??” Ben quickly takes the boxes of Kenji, noting how heavy they are. No wonder Kenji couldn’t get up.

“Boxes fell on me.” The other supplies simply. Ben rolls his eyes as he offers him a hand. Kenji takes it gratefully, though once he’s on his feet again, he winces. “What the heck are inside these things?”

“That’s what I wanna know. Where’d these even come from??”

“My dad had a storage unit and I brought everything here. The rent wasn’t paid on time and they threatened to auction it all off if I didn’t take it.”

“Why didn’t you just pay for another month?”

“Money’s kinda tight right now.” Kenji rotates his shoulder, and once again he winces. Ben wants to ask if he’s okay, but holds back. “The funeral is coming up and it wasn’t cheap. I didn’t even pay anyone to help me get all this up here. Made three trips by myself.”

“You drove to the unit three times, and hauled all this up here, in the couple of hours I was gone?”

“What can I say? I get stuff done when I’m motivated.” Kenji smirks. “Besides, not that many of them are all that heavy. There’s just a lot of it.”

“I’ll say.” Ben looks around again, taking in the sheer amount of stuff.

He opens one of the boxes that fell on Kenji and looks inside, finding it filled with paper. Many of them seem to be related to Mantah Corp, with more than a few details blacked out. Honestly, it looks like something you’d find in a detective’s office, or in a government audit.

“What is it?” Kenji asks, peeking over his shoulder.

“I dunno. Looks like stuff from your dad’s old job.”

“Psh. Okay, I can have that shredded.” Kenji opens the other box that fell on him. Inside is even more paperwork. “No wonder these were so heavy.”

“Should be more careful. You could’ve been seriously hurt.” Ben chastises. It goes ignored as Kenji continues to open more of the boxes, sifting through their contents.

This isn’t the first time Ben has had to remind the other to be careful. It’s been hard to describe how Daniel’s death has affected Kenji. He was distraught when he got the news, yes, but after that… Mopey and lethargic is what he was expecting, like how most people would be after losing a parent. It’s how he was after losing his own father. Instead, it’s like Kenji has been on turbo-drive. He’s been filming for a few other projects on top of ‘In The Stars,’ and since the film is temporarily on hiatus, he’s been giving everything else 200%. A few times Ben has accompanied him on set, and he’s seen first hand how hard the other is working.

Then he got hurt.

Kenji made it clear that after Camp Cretaceous, he didn't like doing his own stunts. So it was more than a surprise for Ben when Kenji volunteered to do one- and not a simple one either, mind you. He was supposed to backflip off some scaffolding onto an inflatable bag below. Despite practicing and listening to a twenty minute briefing from the stunt coordinator, Kenji, somehow, landed a few feet away from the inflatable.

It may have been a little unprofessional, but Ben ran onto the set to make sure he's alright. Kenji quickly got to his feet and brushed himself off, laughing as he did. A handful of crew rushed to his side to check on him themselves, pushing Ben away in the process. Despite the accident, Kenji insisted that he could nail it, and the director allowed him to keep trying.

On the drive back, Ben asked if he was okay. The guy just smiled, and continued to talk about what he was going to be filming the next day.

He got hurt the next day too.

A similar incident- Kenji wanted to do a stunt himself, and he landed wrong. This time, however, he didn't just walk it off. After missing the landing, he laid on the ground, unmoving. The onsite paramedics rushed in, and all Ben could do was watch from the sidelines. It only took them a minute to get him to his feet, but every second felt like an eternity.

The director told Kenji he wasn't allowed to do his stunts for the rest of the shoot, and though he looked disappointed, he agreed. With the stunt double taking over, Kenji went to crafty to wait for his next scene, and Ben finally got to talk to him.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah, Seanny, I’m good. Just landed hard is all.’

‘Do you want me to call Kelly? Maybe see if you can take tomorrow off?’

‘I’m fine, I’m telling you.’ Kenji insisted. ‘Kinda bummed Chris won’t let me try again, but I get it.’

‘I’m glad he isn’t. You gotta be more careful, you aren’t trained like Yaz is.’

‘I’ve done stunts before, you know.’

‘I know you didn’t get hurt back then.’

‘You’re worrying over nothing, Ben. I’m fine. Really.’

If that second incident were the last time, he would’ve dropped it. But then Ben started noticing that blase disregard for his safety in other parts of his life. He drives faster and more reckless, his hands are covered in cuts and burns from cooking, he confronts paps that are too aggressive, and he goes climbing in bad weather- all innocuous to anyone else, but to Ben, they’re signs of an underlying problem. Now, he can add ‘stacking heavy boxes on top of each other and almost getting crushed under them’ to his list of ‘strange incidents.’

Since he's not sure about suggesting Kenji talk to Dr Harding, he considers maybe asking Yaz to reach out. On top of being one of the

best stunt actors, she also has a degree in psychology and therapy. It was kept under wraps, but for years, she had been dealing with some heavy mental health issues. She had Sammy to lean on, and the rest of them, but in the end, she needed professional help. One thing led to another, and she eventually went to school and got a degree in the field, hoping to help others in need- you know, when she's not leaping through rings of fire for a Netflix show.

Honestly, as good an option as Yaz it, he wishes he could persuade Darius, or Brooklynn, or BOTH, to talk to Kenji. Ben is his boyfriend, yes, and he'd even consider himself one of his best friends. But really, it's those two who've been the closest to Kenji all this time. The have a little spat right now, and it might make things awkward, but considering everything going on, Ben may just bite the bullet and reach out first.

For right now, though, the pair of them go through the boxes and sort their contents into piles- keep, donate, and toss. Besides some of Daniel's old suits, which Ben insisted went into the donation pile, everything else so far has been put in 'toss.' To be fair, most of it is junk, but there are a few things here that Ben is certain would go for more than a pretty penny.

"I think this is a real Gadi." Ben says, admiring a small marble sculpture that Kenji took one look at before unceremoniously placing it on the pile. "You know, you could sell-"

"Nope. I hate that stupid thing. I just want it gone."

"What? Why?"

For a moment, Kenji doesn't say anything. He blankly looks inside one of the few remaining unopened boxes, seemingly ignoring Ben. He resigns to himself that this is just another thing Kenji won't talk about.

As he's putting the thing back on the pile, ready to go through another box, Kenji surprisingly speaks up, in a soft but steady voice.

"It was the first thing he bought after getting promoted at Mantah Corp. I was… nine or ten at the time. Mom was gone already, and his short lived tryst with his secretary Candy had fizzled out. So, with no one to spoil, he bought himself a genuine Gadi."

Ben doesn't say anything, intent on letting Kenji tell his story.

"It's not like I never got what I wanted or anything, so it didn't matter to me what he spent his money on. He wasn't relying on me and my acting career just yet. It's just… he took care of that thing like it was his baby- making sure it's always clean and showing it off to guests that came around the house. Well, one day, I guess I was playing in the living room, and I knocked into the table it was perched on." Kenji visibly swallows, taking a pause before continuing.

"My arm got bruised from where I hit it, but of course, all my dad saw was that his precious Gadi got knocked over. *'You should look where you're going, Kenji.' 'This thing is worth more than my car, Kenji.' 'If you break it, there'll be hell to pay, Kenji.'* There I was, clutching my arm in pain, and all he cared about was a stupid piece of marble."

"Kenji…"

"I just- Why was he like that? Why didn't he care about me? I guess I was just an afterthought- his son, in name only. At least, until he started messing up at work and needed me to make all the money. Even then, I still loved him. Even then, I still needed him. But he got so mad about work, so mad at everything I did. He started to…"

"I know, I know. Don't think about it." Ben abandons his box, slowly

making his way to the other who's back is still turned to him.

"The night when he barged in here, he complained that he had to sell our old house and a lot of his stuff to survive. You know what I thought? *So what!?* He barely left me with anything! And he had the gall to talk about mom! He didn't visit me for *her* sake, just to leech off of me some more!"

"Hey, calm down. You're getting-"

"I am!" He says, not calmly at all. "You know what the worst part is?" Kenji finally turns around, his brows knit and a sardonic smile on his lips. The sight makes Ben stop in his tracks. "The man supposedly had very little, but he didn't sell the most expensive thing he owned. He came to me, guilt tripping me and begging me for money, when this alone could've had him on his feet again. I honestly thought he had already sold it, so imagine my surprise finding it in one of these goddamn boxes!" He guffaws, the sound dry and pained. "So no, Seanny. I don't wanna sell it. I want it destroyed. I wanna throw it down the deepest hole I can find and never look at it ever again!"

Ben finally closes the distance and wraps his arms around Kenji's shoulders, slowly so as not to startle him. Kenji twitches under his grip, but Ben doesn't let go. Slowly, he lowers his head, so their foreheads rest against one another. The shorter man's breathing is haggard, but as Ben holds him, it starts to even out.

"We'll get rid of it. Don't worry. Just breathe."

Kenji whispers in a broken voice, in a language he doesn't understand. He assumes it's Japanese. He only recognizes one word- "お父さん" which he's pretty sure means "father." Ben squeezes him tighter, breathing slowly so Kenji can match his tempo.

In the days since the accident, Kenji never got like this. Ben doesn't want to say he was bottling everything, but somehow, this feels like a big release of emotions that were threatening to spill over. In his own experience, he knows Kenji is far from okay, even after this (probably) cathartic outburst. It'll take time to return to normal, or at least, close to normal.

He needs support right now, like how Bumpy and Doctor Harding were for him. His mind wanders to Kenji's godfather Simon Masrani, who is gone too, and knows Kenji's grief for him must also be overwhelming. That man was one of the few adults he could rely on, especially after moving out. Without him, his circle has become smaller. But Ben is going to step up, and be there when he needs him-now more than ever.

But he knows Kenji needs the others too, especially his best friends Darius and Brooklynn.

--

The last time Ben attended a funeral, it was for a friend of a friend. Heck, he didn't even attend the actual service, only dropping off a card and making a quick appearance at the repast. He felt out of place, having only experienced Jewish funerals before.

The memorial service for Simon Masrani is more of a semi-formal gathering so mourners can pay their respects. His family had already performed the traditional ceremonies and rituals, though not much could be done when there wasn't a body to perform them on. Ben tries not to think about that.

At first, Kenji didn't want to attend, though he wouldn't outright

explain why. Ben thinks it has something to do with the fact his dad and Simon were together when they died. He doesn't say this of course, choosing instead to simply coax Kenji into going. It took time, but eventually, he got the man to see reason and join him.

One reason Ben insisted Kenji come is, even if he was hesitant, he knows the other would regret it for the rest of his life if he couldn't say goodbye. The other reason is he knows the rest of the Camp Fam will be here, and even if this might be in poor taste considering the occasion, he wants Brooklynn, Darius, and Kenji to finally start talking again.

Luckily for him, the pair are sitting by themselves. Sammy and Yaz are chatting away with a few others he recognizes, so Ben doesn't worry about them interrupting.

"Come with me for a second." Ben gently grabs Kenji's hand, leading him over. The other doesn't put up a fight, though he looks uncomfortable- probably sensing what Ben has in mind.

Before they can reach Darius and Brooklynn, a man who looks remarkably like Simon Masrani stops them. It's startling, considering where they are. The only difference between him and the man they're here to honor is the hair- where Simon wore a nicely styled coiffure, this man's hair reminds Ben of Kenji's when they were teenagers.

"Sorry to bother, but you're Kenji, right?" The man says, his voice similar as well. Kenji just nods, staring at the man with confusion. "I thought so. My brother often spoke fondly of you."

"You're Simon's brother?" Ben asks. The man turns to him with a smile and holds out his hand for him to shake.

“Sedrick Masrani, Chief Financial Officer of Masrani studios. Well, since my dear twin brother’s unfortunate death, I’ve been elevated as the new head of the studio.” Ben shakes his hand, barely holding back a wince at how firm the guy squeezes him. “You must be Ben. It’s good of you to come. Both of you.”

“Of course. Your brother treated us well.”

“Indeed. He pumped a lot of money into that movie of yours.” Sedrick says knowingly.

Oh, here we go. The day Ben hoped would never come is finally here. He can see it now- he’ll get an email about termination of contract, and the film will be shelved, never to see the light of day. Months of work, gone.

“What’s with the dour look? I bear good news.” Sedrick laughs. The sound catches the attention of a few nearby people, though the man doesn’t seem to mind. “Don’t worry. All my brother’s projects are going to be finished and released. I owe him that much.”

Ben tries not to show it, but the news is a massive weight off his shoulders. Kenji, who hasn’t said a word so far, visibly relaxes at his words. Though, he still looks nervous for some reason- unable to look Sedrick in the eye.

“Well, we’re happy to hear that. I think I speak for all of us when I say we’re-”

“I’m so sorry, sir.” Kenji interjects, speaking over him.

“Sorry?” The older man cocks his head. “What for?”

“I- I just– My father was with Simon in the crash, and I just can’t help but worry that you might-”

“Kenji-” Ben tries, seeing where he’s going with this. Both are stopped when Sedrick holds up a hand, a kind smile on his face.

“I thank you for your concern, but it’s unwarranted. If anything, I should apologize to *you.”*

“Me?” The older man smiles ruefully, and if Ben's being honest, a little haughtily.

“My brother has always been a bit of a showoff. He had only just finished his helicopter training before that night, and I bet he wanted to take someone on a ride. I’m sorry that it happened to be your father.”

“No, you don’t have to be sorry.” Kenji eeks out, a frown on his face.

“And neither do you, my boy. You’re far too young to have that kind of burden lingering over you.”

Kenji doesn’t say anything to that. After a moment, he just nods, once again finding it hard to look at Sedrick.

“Well, I have to greet my other guests. Please, help yourself to the bar or the buffet.” With that, the older man leaves. Once he’s out of sight,

Ben's attention is trained on Kenji again. The other still looks pensive. When he notices Ben's gaze, Kenji offers a tight smile.

"I'm fine."

"Alright. Look, I know I was practically dragging you to go do it, but if you don't wanna talk to-"

"Don't worry. I-I think I'm ready. I can't possibly make it worse, right?" The man chuckles dryly, and Ben returns it.

"If you're sure. I'll be over by the bar."

"You're not gonna come say hi?" Kenji asks. Ben shakes his head.

"It's all you, Kenji." The other suddenly looks worried. Quickly, Ben amends his words. "But, if you really need me, just text me and I'll rush over, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, babe."

Ben smiles at the use of the nickname. If this were a few months ago, he might've panicked, especially in such a crowded setting. Maybe it's because things have changed so much over time, but he doesn't really mind that someone might have overheard Kenji.

Before heading to the bar, Ben watches his lover make his way to their friends. Kenji rubs the back of his neck as he reaches them. Almost immediately, Brooklynn stands up and hugs him, as does Darius, and

Ben knows he has nothing to worry about.

--

Ben always thought his first trip to Hawaii would be for a role or for a vacation. The closest he got was as an extra where he was digitally added to a scene that took place here. Instead, he's here for a more somber reason- Daniel Kon's funeral. He never knew this about Kenji, but apparently he and his father are part Native Hawaiian. Daniel had lived here until he moved to California to work for Mantah Corp. It makes sense why he would've wanted to be buried here.

Despite his own personal feelings towards the man, he is Kenji's father. Kenji knows better than anyone what kind of man Daniel is, so if he doesn't have a problem with having a nice funeral for him, Ben won't say a word. The rest of the Camp Fam have also made the journey, helping them with a lot of the preparations leading up to the service.

Grateful that Kenji has reconciled with Brooklynn and Darius, he has taken a step back to allow them to spend more time together. And with Sammy and Yaz, since it's been almost as long. Seeing Kenji relaxing and having fun with the others, considering why they're here in the first place, has been a blessing. He's grateful for whatever time they can spend together.

The day of the funeral arrives, and to Ben's utter shock, hardly anyone shows up. The obituary went up a while ago, both in the islands and in California as well. Hell, the way he died made national news! He's heard of how family oriented people are here, so he figured it'd be a full house. So, either everyone Daniel knew collectively missed every single bit of news about him over the past few weeks, or the man had burned more bridges than he thought. As it is, the only people in attendance are the Camp Fam, most of their managers, Sedrick Masrani's assistant (the man currently busy running the studio now), a few of Daniel's cousins, and the priest who's leading the service.

If Kenji minded, or even noticed, he didn't show it. He just performs his duties as chief mourner as solemnly as expected of the deceased's son.

The casket is closed, though really, it wouldn't matter if it were open. There isn't a body to bury, so the thing is empty. Well, mostly. Ben isn't sure if he should laugh or cry at the gesture, but before they sealed the casket, Kenji put a single item inside- his dad's prized Gadi statue. He did want it in a hole, after all.

The church sits on a hill, overlooking a valley with the vast ocean in the distance. The area is idyllic- nice enough for the filmmakers of the original Jurassic movies, who filmed many scenes at an area nearby. The sermon is short and sweet, and Kenji's eulogy was moving, if not padded with innuendos here and there. He never outright says it, but he implies that the man wasn't that good of a father. He also says, despite all that, he still wishes him peace, wherever he might be.

Ben, Darius, and the couple of cousins who came carry the casket out of the church and into the hearse, where it will take a short drive down to the burial site. Kenji, as chief mourner, carries a framed photo of Daniel, while another relative carries a wooden tablet with his father's name in Japanese carved into it. They march ahead of everyone else as they make their way down. Ben makes sure to stay only a few steps behind him.

Once the casket is lowered into the ground, everyone present takes a moment to say their condolences to Kenji. The Camp Fam especially take their time, making sure to each give him a long hug. Though, because there are so few people, this takes almost no time at all.

As time goes by, everyone starts to leave. The last to remain are the Fam, but eventually they go as well. Before they leave, Yaz warns them not to stay too long or risk being seen. Now, all that's left is

Kenji and Ben.

Kenji hasn't moved from his spot next to the grave. It's already filled in, a small mound of dirt where the casket was. A stoic expression rests on his face, no hint of a smile or frown. If he weren't blinking, he might be mistaken for a statue. Still, Ben refuses to leave his side, and waits until he's ready to go.

Without a word, Kenji gets up, and heads to their rental car, with Ben in tow close behind. He puts the portrait and the wooden tablet in the trunk, and gets into the passenger seat. The same stoic expression. Ben knows better than to ask if he's okay- of course he isn't. Still, this lack of… anything is almost eerie.

Ben almost misses it, but as he starts the car, and engine hums to life, a cracked sob escapes from Kenji. He looks over and sees the other man turned away from him. In his reflection in the passenger side window, however, he can see tears flowing freely from his eyes, and his mouth downturned in a deep frown. This is the first time this trip that Kenji has cried- at least, as far as he's aware. It occurs to him that, despite everything else, Kenji is an excellent actor. He played the role of the dutiful son, who carried out the duties expected of him, right until the very end. Now that he's done, he no longer holds back and lets everything that's been bottled up go.

He's unsure what he should do. Yes, every fiber of his being is saying to reach over and comfort him, but… what if that isn't what he wants? Or needs? What if he needs this moment of vulnerability to just let it out, and then be done with it? Ben knows the feeling- he's needed moments like this himself over the years.

--

-years ago-

Ben can’t believe how long it’s been since he’s visited home.

He had spent the morning wrapping on the newest season of the show he’s been working on, then immediately flew to Chicago right after. Mae worked tirelessly to arrange his schedule so he'd have two weeks off, and he's going to use this time to the fullest. His mom is expecting him, since they’re planning on spending Hanukkah together this year, though not until later in the evening. Ben managed to get an earlier flight, and is in the city a whole five hours earlier than he’s supposed to be.

So, to kill time, he went to visit his father’s grave.

He’s not sure why that was his first instinct. The man died when he was little, but what he does remember of him is warm and happy. He doesn’t recall his mom being sad all that often, but that’s probably because she threw herself into her work and to setting up some auditions for Ben. He smiles, remembering how long she’s been supportive of his love for acting.

It takes him a while, but eventually, he finds the grave. It’s clean, if not more aged than he remembers. The flowers left there are dried out, but not that old. His mom must’ve visited pretty recently.

It’s freezing. Ben laments it, but he’s spent too much time in warmer climates. Years ago, he would’ve worn shorts in weather like this, but now, he can’t leave the house without a scarf if it’s below sixty-degrees. As it is, he wishes he had a blanket to wrap himself in right now.

Ben isn’t really sure what he’s supposed to do. Does he just stand here for a minute, then leave? Does he say a prayer? Honestly, this is the

first time he's ever come here alone. When he used to come with his mom, she'd bring a can of his dad's favorite soda along with a few flowers from her garden. Then, she'd talk- mostly about what he's missed since the last time they visited.

So Ben does just that.

"Hey, uh, dad." He says awkwardly, internally cringing at himself. "It's been a while, huh?"

This feels kind of silly. People really do this all the time? Regardless, he presses on.

"Things have been going pretty great for me in Cali. I just bought my own house. It's nothing fancy, but it's mine. Oh, and I got a sweet deal on a van last year. Again, it's not in the best condition, but it serves me well."

Ben goes on like this, though he's unsure for how long. He just says what comes to mind, regaling his old man of his life as if he were there listening to him. He even finds it in him to talk about his past relationship.

"You're probably shocked to hear I like guys, huh? Or, maybe not. My manager said she knew the moment she met me, so it would probably be obvious to my parents. Though, ma has never said anything. Maybe she already knows and is waiting for me to say something. Don't tell her though! I'll… find the right time." Ben sighs, feeling silly for asking his Dad not to say anything, as if he were really there listening. He consoles himself that he can at least talk about his ex without feeling the urge to scratch his arms. Shaking his head, Ben presses on.

"I don't really remember much of our time together, but I always kind

of wished you were here. Mostly... so mom could take it easy. She worked so hard to keep both of us afloat for so long. She used barely any of the money I made from acting, always using her own first. She had a nice sum saved up by the time I was eighteen and left me all of it. First thing I did was buy her a house back here."

He's hasn't actually seen the house in person yet. This trip is going to be the first. He bought it for her when he was eighteen, and it's taking him this long to find time to come back home and visit. Normally, she comes down to LA and they spend time together there. In fact, if Ben didn't insist, he thinks she'd have come to stay with him in California for a few days instead. She's very understanding of his workload and inconsistent free-time.

"I was lucky." Ben sighs, the cold air passing through him like a knife in the dark.

Talking about his mom like this has him thinking about his friends who were also raised by single parents. Darius' dad died shortly before *Camp Cretaceous* filmed it's first season, so the pain was fresh for him. His mom was able to carry on raising two boys alone, though it probably helped that both Darius and Bran earned money and helped her out. Still couldn't have been easy, though.

His mind, like it so often does, wanders to Kenji.

Both Ben and Darius were lucky, he supposes. Sure, Kenji was raised with a silver spoon in his mouth, but considering the kind of man his dad is, he surely had the worst childhood of the three. Ben can't imagine having that man as the only person to rely on. Despite everything he did, he still feels sorry for Kenji, having to depend on him so long, putting up with all his crap just because he's the only parent he has left.

Ben shakes his head, not liking thinking about Kenji for too long.

For a moment, he stands there, looking at the dull grey stone that makes up his father's grave. He's not sure why, but… talking to it- talking to him, makes him feel a lot better. He never realized how therapeutic it is to just let it all out. Sure, he's told Doctor Harding these things before, but that was because she's his therapist. He felt obliged to say these things because that's what he was paying her to do- to listen and to help him.

Ben isn't looking for help right now, but in a way, taking these quiet moments to himself has proved almost as enlightening. If nothing else, it felt good to express these thoughts.

"Ben?" A familiar voice calls to him. Ben spins around and finds his mother walking along the line of graves towards him.

"Ma?" He calls. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Mae called me as soon as you left LA, sweetie. Since you didn't come straight to the house, I figured you'd be here."

"Really? I didn't. I came here on a whim." As soon as she's close enough, the two embrace. His mom sighs into the hug, squeezing him tightly. "Hey."

"Hi. Geez, you got even taller."

"Tell me about it. I think I'm pushing six-five now."

“It’s a shame you never took to basketball. You’d be a starter for the Bulls by now.” Ben playfully rolls his eyes. Every time they meet up in person, his mom makes a comment about his height going to waste. She’s been his biggest supporter, so he knows she’s just kidding.

“Bench warmer, more likely.” She laughs at that. “So, since you’re here, did you wanna chat with him for a while?”

“I’m good. I came to visit a couple weeks ago, and not much has happened since.”

“Okay.” Ben glaces at his watch, seeing it’s close to dinner time. “Say, wanna go grab a pie? I haven’t had good pizza in a while.”

“Sure, sweetie. But, are you done talking with your dad?”

“Huh?” She looks at him sheepishly.

“I, uh, actually got here a little while ago. But, I saw you were talking so animatedly, I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Ma, you shoulda just come over. I wouldn’t have minded.” Part of Ben is grateful she didn’t, considering what he was saying. Still, he means it- it would’ve been nice if she had joined him.

“It’s okay.” She shakes her head. “Everyone needs moments alone sometimes.”

He lingers there for a second, absorbing her words. Ben never

realized, until that moment, just how similar he is to his mother. She must have put up with a lot, being a single mother, especially since she moved them across the country just so Ben can pursue his dreams. She never complained to him, and he wonders if she had any outlet. Maybe, talking to his dad was her way of venting. He wonders if she would have benefited from having someone to talk to that would give feedback, like he did with Doctor Harding and Bumpy.

Despite this, he thinks she has a point- it was nice to just let it out without anyone there to respond. Maybe life is trying to find the balance between standing on your own and leaning on people.

He's so grateful he still has her, and that she has him.

She smiles up at him, a fond look in her eyes.

"Oh, look at you- you're all red! I haven't seen you like this in forever." She reaches up and cups his cheeks, probably rosy in this cold weather. "C'mon. If you're done, let's go get dinner. My treat."

"Sure, ma."

As he follows her, Ben takes a moment to look over his shoulder to look at his dad's grave one last time. To his surprise, a can of soda is sitting on it where there wasn't anything before. He turns his attention back to his mom, smiling down at her. How she managed to do that without him noticing, he'll never know. She notices him looking at her and smiles back.

He really needs to come home more often.

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-present-

Another choked sob escapes from Kenji, and Ben is still debating what to do.

Should he comfort him? Or leave him be? Maybe he should say something? Right now, he's not sure which Kenji needs.

A different sound catches Ben's attention. Instead of a sob, Kenji inhales sharply. His eyes close, and he breathes deeply. It's shaky at first, but every breath afterwards grows steadier and steadier, until he's the picture of calm and collected.

When he finally opens his eyes again, he looks at Ben. His eyes are bloodshot and he can barely keep a ghost of a smile on his lips. Still, all on his own, he simply let it out, and seems better now. Ben knows he's not *actually* okay- and he probably won't be for some time still. But for right now, he's got things under control, and that's enough for Ben to relax.

"Sorry." Kenji says timidly.

"Don't be. I get it. You take as much time as you need." Ben offers. The smile on the other's lips grows a little.

"I'm good now, really. Thank you, Benny. I'm grateful you've been there for me through all of this."

“Of course."

"I mean it- even the stuff at Simon's funeral. I appreciate all of it."

"I’m just glad you’re on good terms with Darius and Brooklynn again. If things get rough, I hope you can rely on them again too, like you used to.”

“That’s all thanks to you too, y’know. I might not have reached out if you didn’t practically shove me headfirst.” Ben playfully rolls his eyes.

“Well, I think you would’ve. They’re your best friends, after all.”

“Not just them, Benny.”

“Yeah, I know, Yaz and Sammy are also on that list.”

“No, no. Well, yeah they *are,* but that’s not what-” Ben smirks at him. He grabs Kenji’s cheeks, cupping them in his hands, and gets so close their noses touch.

“I’m just messing with you. Thanks, by the way.”

He finally closes the distance, and places a chaste kiss on the other’s lips. When he pulls away, it’s like Kenji has stars in his eyes. He’s not sure how to describe the expression. It almost feels like… awe? Reverence? In any case, he looks at Ben like he hung the stars, and such a gaze makes his face heat up.

Kenji also grabs his face, and kisses Ben within an inch of his life. He's caught off guard at first, a moan of protestation escaping him from how sudden it was. Effortlessly, Kenji eases him into it, and Ben leans into his touch, melding together. This is a weird place to be making out, but considering the guy was literally sobbing a minute ago, he chooses to ignore it.

When Kenji finally pulls away, that look is still in his eyes- like Ben is everything.

"You're *more* than my best friend, Ben. I've loved you since we were kids, even when we were apart."

"Kenji-"

"And, I know you have your reasons for being reserved about our relationship. God knows I'm probably a good chunk of them."

"Wait--"

"Life is so short, Ben. You think you have all the time in the world. But one day, it'll be too late. I have regrets in my life when it comes to my dad, and there's nothing I can do about it now. But I don't want to have regrets when it comes to you. While you're here with me, I don't want to hide."

A small, bitter part of Ben, one that still lingers in the mistakes of the past, thinks how nice it would have been if Kenji came to this conclusion when they were together the first time. But *no,* he reasons, if it weren't for everything that happened back then, they wouldn't be who they are now. Ben loved the Kenji he met. But that boy is gone,

and the man he has become has his heart.

"Are you saying…" He tries, his voice tight.

"I know I told you I'd wait until you were ready. But… I want the world to know, babe. I want everyone to know that you're mine. That you always were. And, if I'm lucky, you always will be."

Ben's heart is pounding in his chest. That suspiciously sounded like a proposal, but he knows better. Still, Kenji's words settle in his heart, and he feels his own tears threatening to spill over. He holds back, waiting to see where Kenji is going with all this.

"If you're ready, I want to go public with us. I want you to know I will always be proud to be yours, and proud that you're mine. I'll protect you from all the paps, the internet assholes, and whoever else gives you a hard time. So please think about it. We'll do whatever you want, Ben."

Ben immediately closes the distance again, and the pair are kissing each other within an inch of their lives. He feels it in his touch, in the way he kisses him, in his words- Kenji means everything he said.

Honestly, he's terrified. Not just from the scrutiny he'll probably have to endure, but from just how uncertain the future is for them. Filming for In The Stars will resume soon and will be over in no time. Movie leads get together all the time, and break up just as often. Hollywood romances don't typically last. Of course, there are many cases where they do. As much as he trusts Kenji, part of him can't look past what has already gone down between them.

But Kenji is right. Life is short. He doesn't want to have regrets, doesn't want to be talking to another gravestone in fifty years, wishing

he said what he wanted to when he was alive. Or, vice versa. Anything is possible! Even if it ends, not giving it his all would be a waste- a sentiment they once shared, years ago. He doesn't want Kenji to go through what he did the first time.

Right now, they're literally in a graveyard not five yards from Kenji's dad's grave. Right now, they're both emotionally charged. Right now, he might just say *yes* without thinking it through.

So despite his decision being made in his heart, despite what he wants to say, Ben pulls away from the other, inhales deeply, and calmly says-

"Okay. Let me think about it?"

There isn't even a hint of disappointment in Kenji's eyes, nor is there any sign he's holding back for his sake. He genuinely is okay with Ben's answer, and all the more he's convinced of what he really wants.

"Whatever you want, babe." Kenji says with a smile.

And he knows he means it.

Chapter End Notes

Grow As We Go by Ben Platt

Listen to the fic playlist on Spotify or Apple Music (contains

chapter name spoilers)

Thanks for reading!

If you're wondering, there's still a little more angst to come, but mostly fluff and happy times are ahead, I promise lol

If you're wondering, Sedrick is Simon Masrani's twin brother from one of the LEGO specials lol
And, though not strictly canon, it's been implied that Kenji is at least part Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiian) via the official Dreamworks accounts.

So, yeah this took me a little over a year to get out lol Sorry. Long story short- my Dad had cancer and I had to drop everything to be his caregiver until he got better. I'm glad to say he's in remission now. I intended to post this sooner, but then, my best friend died, and I had to deal with all of that. This chapter, as you can tell, deals with death and grief, and it became very hard for me to continue writing. I'm better now, though, so don't worry✌

I am VERY determined to finish this before my birthday (early June) so I'm gonna try and pump out the last few chapters every 2 weeks, if not sooner. This has been on hiatus long enough. I already have the ending planned out, so it's just a matter of taking the time to type everything out.

Next chapter will be released by March 10th. Look forward to it!
EDIT: I know, I know, a delay :(But I got a good chunk done! Got kinda busy this weekend, so didn't have as much time as I wanted. Gonna push to March 13th instead. Look forward to it!

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Check out my Ben/Kenji AUs!

- JWCC Rewrite AU
- Chaos Theory Slowburn
- Regular Summer Camp! AU
- Fake Dating/Theater Major x Jock/College AU
- Friends to Lovers to Exes to Lovers/Actors AU (WIP)

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Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!